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FOR THE SAKE OF THE DUCHESS

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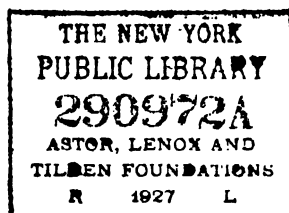
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FOR THE SAKE OF THE DUCHESSE

CHAPTER I

A ROYAL TEMPTER

"No!" I cried. "There's my answer, Monseigneur!" *tu*

"Then you refuse to obey me?"

"Absolutely," I returned. "I am not a murderer!"

And with this I lounged off towards an oriel, leaving the Regent of France and Dubois to stare at one another across the wine-stained, card-strewn table. Snow was driving against the windows of the Luxembourg, and a red gush of light, pouring from the great portico out upon the wide, glittering gardens, created a scene of exquisite romance that held me chained, until a shuffling of feet caused me to glance round on my companions, and I saw that Dubois was kindling some fresh candles. I hated Dubois; he was coarse to the marrow, despicably sleek and low,

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and had a vile habit of audibly sucking his teeth in a manner which made me itch to tickle his lungs with the point of my rapier ; and although this little wretch had lured me to the Luxembourg on a pretence that M. Duc d'Orléans desired the loan of my brain and my sword for a dangerous State mission, began to suspect he intended to make me his cat's paw in a devilish plot of his own conception.

He had set the Regent to ask me deliberately to kill a man as though I were naught but a common stabber, a black rogue, or a red rascal—me, Audra de Championnet, a Vicomte of France and a gentleman ! What if it were true that I had fought twenty duels in three years : what if my name had been bandied to and fro by enemies as that of a gambler, an adventurer, and a ruffling rogue, ready to sell his sword to the highest bidder ? None of these slurs upon my free fashion of living a gay life in my own way gave the Regent or Dubois a right to imagine that money could buy my honour !

While I stayed raging in the oriel, Philippe d'Orléans called me by name, and I strolled back to the table, caring no more for my illustrious companions than if they had been fellow-drinkers at a tavern, and fearing them not at all.

“ Well, Monseigneur ? ” I said, folding my arms and looking upon him with a burning eye.

"You were hasty, Vicomte," he replied. "You allowed me no time to explain my position."

"It seemed too plain. You requested me to kill a man, and I declined, so the matter is at an end. With your permission, Monseigneur, I will take my leave and retire."

And I caught up my hat and cloak.

"I beg you to wait a little," he cried, slipping his arm through mine. "You fared ill at cards, and I fear those few louis won by Dubois were all you possessed."

The blood surged to my face and neck.

"I should like to see you often at Court, Vicomte. At one time yours was a familiar figure, and my daughter, the Duchesse de Berri, always regarded you with something more, I think, than ordinary admiration. Are your estates gone?"

"All, Monseigneur!"

"You were ever a sad gamester."

I bowed.

"And a fool."

I laughed.

"And an extremely bold, accomplished, and charming rascal."

I bowed again.

"You honour me, Monseigneur."

"Where have you been the last two years?"

"Making the most of a gay life, Monseigneur."

"Which has now come to an end."

"All things have their price," I reflected.

"And yet your sword is priceless."

It was Dubois. He was sipping some Moselle and glancing at me with a sly leer, and whenever his lips were free from the glass he sucked his teeth with maddening persistence.

"And yet your sword is priceless," he repeated "Vicomte, His Highness the Regent has learned that the Chevalier de Cheverny holds the strings of another intrigue fostered by Cardinal Alberoni—an intrigue which should be crushed within a month. You are the man to crush it."

"France is at stake," said the Regent, looking very stout and princely.

"And Monseigneur's head may be in danger."

"Yours also, Abbé."

Dubois made a horrible grimace, and scowled at me when I laughed.

"You say Alberoni is implicated?" I said.

"Deeply. Come, de Championnet, here is a mission which will bring you riches, power, royal favour, fame, honour——"

I stopped him by a gesture.

"A mission tainted by murder is scarcely an honourable one, Monseigneur."

"A mission full of romance—of danger, and of subtlety," continued the Regent; "and if hearsay goes for aught, there is no man in Europe with so great a love towards these things as Audran de Championnet. This is M. l'Abbé's little plot, Vi-comte. He has discovered that the heir to de Cheverny's estates is his nephew, Silvain, a man who was banished from France ten years ago for some extraordinary crime."

"It was committed while I was his brother lieutenant in the Royal Guards, Monseigneur."

"Exactly. You very much resemble one another in appearance, I believe?"

"The likeness often allowed me to take his place in the guard-room while he dined, drank, or played cards, and sometimes I claimed the same favour at his hands."

"So Dubois told me."

"But how does he know."

"M. l'Abbé knows everything," said the Regent.

"Yes, everything," said Dubois. "M. le Vi-comte, this man has come to Paris from England, and I have him safe in the Bastille. To-night I will give him the Regent's pardon, set him free, and then, while he makes his way to the Chevalier de Cheverny's château, you will spring on his trail, track him to his first halting-place, force a

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quarrel with the rogue, and run him through the heart ! ”

“ A great thought of yours, M. l'Abbé ! ” I cried, ironically.

“ Superb ! ” he purred, scratching the table with his nails. “ When he is dead, you will take possession of his papers and rings, particularly a signet given him by the Chevalier, and ride on to the Château de Cheverny, where I dare say you will receive an enthusiastic welcome, especially as you will, of course, possess the pardon, establishing your right as heir to the whole domain, and if your disguise is perfect they will never so much as dream their guest is anyone but Silvain.”

“ Excellently worked out ! ” I said.

“ The plot is sublime,” returned Dubois. “ When you have entirely won the confidence of the Chevalier, search for the letters relating to the intrigue, and send them to Monseigneur the Regent. He will then hold the conspirators in the hollow of his hand, and Alberoni shall be the laughing-stock of Europe. After your work is done, name your price, M. le Vicomte, and I do not think you will find us niggardly. Can you suggest any improvement on my proposals ? ”

“ They are perfect, M. l'Abbé.”

“ And you believe they will work ? ”

"Admirably, if you succeed in finding a man with enough wit, craft, and baseness to carry them through. Search for a rascal; no one calling himself a gentleman would touch so despicable a plot!"

The Regent started; Dubois turned first white, then purple, with rings of green around his eyes, and I had a thought that the little wretch might spit at me. He glanced up with a vicious flash of his teeth, beating the table with skinny fingers, and longing, I know, to feel them close upon my throat.

"What if we command you to obey us, M. le Vicomte?" he snarled, a fleck of froth quivering upon his lips.

"By my soul, I'd say no!" I cried. "Nay, by the God above me, I'd rot in the Bastille all my days; I'd die on the scaffold or be broken on the wheel, before my hands should bear the red stain of so foul a deed!"

A great silence reigned in the chamber; Dubois watched the Regent, and the Regent watched Dubois until I tired of waiting, and swung away once more to the oriel with debonair nonchalance, humming a snatch of a gay chanson. I heard mutterings from behind, and a slight noise of pattering feet, but I stood gazing out into the snowy night

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until the sounds dwindled to a long, intense stillness, broken only by the merry crackling of the fire.

“ Ah, M. le Vicomte, you have come back to me at last ! ”

I spun round on my heel to find the Regent and Dubois gone, and that I was alone with Madame la Duchesse de Berri.

CHAPTER II

MADAME LA DUCHESSE MAKES LOVE

MADAME floated towards me with both her little white hands outstretched—a charming vision in cream and gold, and although the oriel, shrouded by silken tapestry, lay in semi-darkness, the leaping fire-light played upon the dazzling beauty of her face, and I thought I had never seen any woman half so fascinating—so splendid to the eye—so superb in the grace and magnificent hauteur of her carriage.

She slid the tips of her fingers into my hands, and I laid my lips upon them—all my heart seeming to flame with unquenchable fire. A subtle perfume from her hair floated around me, and I had a thirst to crush her in my arms, even though I died on the scaffold for my insolence—all my old, reckless, hopeless passion for Madame waked and waked again—long-forgotten ambitions stirred my soul afresh, and while she stayed there laughing upon me with soft, alluring eyes whose lustre no diamonds

could surpass, whose beauty no sapphire could equal, I dreamed dreams in which I soared high as the lover and ultimately the husband—ay, even the husband—of the daughter of the Regent of France.

“So you have come back to me,” she murmured “Do you find me changed, Audran—less beautiful—grown old?”

“Madame, the rose is still in her first and loveliest bloom.”

“But the frost of widowhood has touched her.”

“And left her more sublime.”

“A widow at twenty,” she reflected. “I seem to be a hundred, at the very least. Perhaps my heart was born old. How many summers have you lived Vicomte?”

“Thirty-five, Madame la Duchesse,” I replied “It is I who am the life-worn one.”

“And the loveless?”

Her eyes were challenging mine with a glance of inimitable coquetry, and, finding no other answer ready, I bowed. She glided away from me, nestling back amid the silken tapestry until her face was hidden. Presently she gave a little quick ripple of laughter.

“Were you never in love, Audran?”

“Once, Madame.”

"With me? I am concealing my face for modesty's sake."

"With you, Madame la Duchesse! It was hopeless, and I left Paris when you married M. le Duc de Berri."

"I was forced to marry him," she returned. "Women's hearts are never free, Vicomte, and 'tis seldom love mates with love. I hear you have gambled away all your demesne."

"It is true."

"And your delightful château?"

"It is mine no longer, Madame. I am simply Audran de Championnet, a poor adventurer, driven to sell his wits or his sword for a few louis with which to buy wine and bread."

"And yet you were once so gay."

"I am gay still, Madame la Duchesse."

"Have you never a regret?"

"Regret is a foolish weakness that may be trodden upon," I replied, smiling.

"But not extinguished. Audran, there was a night, long ago, when at Versailles you spoke to me of love. Have you forgotten it?"

"Madame, my memory was always extraordinary. You were kind to me, if I recollect aright, and gave me hope."

"I adored you," she whispered, stretching out her

arms and letting the shimmery tapestry drop away from her dazzling shoulders. "You were my hero, my king!"

I leapt forward, fell on my knees, and kissed her hands afresh with burning kisses of passionate adoration. All my love was young again—it had blossomed anew, and Madame la Duchesse was mine, mine, mine! I arose and flung wide my arms to her. What cared I now for the grey amid my hair or the face furrowed by perished hopes; for the stained and ragged coat upon my back, my empty purse and gambled patrimony? Madame was my queen, and had given me back a heart for love; Madame was my joy, and she had brought me sweetness; and to live for her would be my glory, to fight for her my pride; and I swore beneath my breath that the man who dared stand 'twixt my love and me should taste my bright sword to the hilt! Ambition, too, had caught my soul, and I saw a swift vision of myself as a great power in France, second only to the Regent, for I would cause the dismissal of Dubois and rid Philippe d'Orléans of a pestilent rascal. And yet—and yet, if I staked my peace and my fortune on this one mighty throw, would my luck hold? Should I win through with clean hands? Madame la Duchesse still retained my fingers, although she had refrained from falling

on my breast ; and when I looked down into the witchery of her eyes, shining like deep, unfathomable pools on which bright moonlight glittered, I saw that they beckoned me still further along the path of love.

"Will you yield yourself to me?" I murmured.

"If I only dared!" came the subtle answer.

"Audran, while our first love blossomed it was plucked and cast aside. May it not be so again?"

"Never!" I cried. "You were young then, Madame, and I was reckless. Naught on earth shall part us a second time."

"But will my father consent? You are homeless, M. le Vicomte, and I do not think the Regent would look on you with greater favour than he showed before, unless you could accomplish some great mission which might gain you his friendship and gratitude. Even the Devil loves good servants!"

She laughed ever so softly, leaning against my shoulder in a manner which brought one stray tress of her scented hair to float across my cheek, and I slipped my arm around her waist, holding her very close to me.

"You hurt me!" she whispered. "You are a rough lover, Audran! If I promise you my love, what will you dare for my sake?"

"Anything in the world, Madame!" I answered.
"I would almost sell my soul for you!"

"Almost?" she asked, taking my fingers and raising them to her full, red lips.

"Nay, altogether!" I said. "A man can do without a soul in France in these days, Madame la Duchesse."

"I know a way by which, at one stroke, you may claim the Regent's regard, and win riches and honour," she mused, glancing at me with charming sweetness.

"How?" I asked, devouring her beauty.

"By procuring some papers from the Chevalier de Cheverny," she whispered, setting her lips close to my ear; and my heart seemed to stand still. So Madame, too, was in the plot! I saw it all, and cursed a thousand times my lack of wit in failing to peer through this veil of artful and masterly diplomacy.

The Regent and Dubois, finding me firm, had conspired to assail my heart by the wiles of the Duchesse de Berri! She continued to lean against my shoulder, and my growing coldness made me shiver. The chamber was almost entirely in gloom, for the candles kindled by Dubois had guttered, one by one, in their rich, heavy sconces, and were slowly burning out.

The snow seemed to have ceased, for a bright moonbeam crept through the glistening glass of the great window, and lay like a silver ribbon about our feet; while another, striking higher, lighted Madame's face, when she gently slid closer to me, and lay at last upon my breast. I saw her eyes, glorious as sapphires, claiming love from mine. I heard the swift panting of her breath, the quick beating of her heart, the impatient pattering of one little foot on the ringing, resonant floor, and in an instant my bitter resentment of her duplicity in M. l'Abbé's scheme had vanished, and I was bending to drink my fill from the fountain of her lips, when she struggled free, and, while gliding away, the mockery of her silvery laugh floated back to my ears like chiming bells, beckoning me onward towards the gate of dishonour and shame. "*Quid proderit homini, si totum mundum lucretur, si animae suae detrimentum patiatur?*" This thought momentarily stabbed at my heart, and I dare say my face, robbed of all ripe colour, the gift of Spanish and Italian suns, was grey and sweat-bedewed,—the face of a man fast caught by black temptation; yet, though my will was strong enough to break the chains, I trampled on that will, and followed Madame to her retreat amid the tapestry. I drew her forth, laughing low.

"M. le Vicomte, you are rough again!" she whispered. "Let me go! You have no right to hold my hands so tightly!"

"No right?" I said, "no right? Are you not mine, Duchesse?"

"Not yet, Audran," she replied, crossing her feet, and leaning against the wainscot with the moonbeams playing round her. "There is only one way by which I may be won. You must gain riches: I am scarcely the woman to marry a pauper."

I bent my head in silence.

"And you must acquire power. How would M. le Duc de Championnet sound?"

"You madden me, Duchesse!"

"With a wide domain, an exquisite château, and apartments at Versailles and the Luxembourg?"

"Madame, do not taunt me more."

"And Madame de Berri your wife!" she murmured, raising her face towards mine. "Do you hesitate longer to serve Monseigneur the Regent in this matter regarding the Chevalier de Cheverny—a traitor and enemy to France?"

I dropped her hands. When I dreamed of winning Madame's love, I had not thought of this as the only way to take her heart by storm. She had given me hope while fulfilment hung aloof in

mockery at a fool's romance, and now that hope was gone. She had offered me herself : she had offered me dishonour. Was it possible she could not know the diabolical intention of Dubois with regard to the Chevalier ? Did she know that by implicating myself in his plot I was playing the parts of a thief and a murderer ?

"You are long in answering me, Audran," she murmured, drawing a little jewelled watch from her bosom and holding it up to catch the moonlight. "It is now nearly ten o'clock ! When the Luxembourg bell strikes I must leave you here alone. Why do you hesitate ? I have asked you such a little thing—it is nothing !"

"Is it nothing to kill a man for no reason, Madame ? Is it a little thing to enter a man's château by fraud ; to gain his confidence, perhaps even his affection, and then rob him of letters which will probably bring his grey hairs to the scaffold ?"

Madame la Duchesse, with characteristic volatility, changed from warm summer to a bitter hail-storm.

"Let him die there !" she cried, stamping her foot. "He is betraying France ! And who are you, Vicomte, to speak like this ? A gamester, a scoundrel, an unscrupulous mercenary unworthy of kissing the dust on my shoes. Do not touch me ;

I am the daughter of Philippe d'Orléans, and you—and you——”

I was rude enough to laugh in her face. “I am Audran de Championnet, Madame,” I said, “and I have no wish to take you in my arms again. You have called me a scoundrel and a mercenary; but I say that you lie, Duchesse, and that I am still a man of honour and a gentleman. Had Dubois taunted me as you have done, I would have sent my blade between his ribs; had your father the Regent dared throw insults in my teeth, I would have made him retract them, one by one, at the point of my sword; but you are a woman, and your sex is your shield, although I confess I should glory in tossing you down amid the snow, if I thought ’twould cool your hot tongue!”

“Devil!” she cried.

“Temptress!” I answered, and she made a pretence of spitting at me.

I laughed insolently, and, leaving the oriel, took my hat, and swung my cloak around me.

“I bid you a long farewell, Duchesse!” I cried, and moved towards the door.

“Come back, Audran!” she commanded.

“Nay,” I replied. “A scoundrel and a mercenary is no company for Madame la Duchesse de Berri.”

“But I love you! I love you!” she cried, and

came running down the chamber. The candles had flickered and gone out, and the moonbeams warred with the great fire's flame, which flung a bloody glow upon the gleaming floor, carving grotesque crosses here and there, and bathing Madame's form in an aureole of beauty while she knelt before me, the very incarnation of the Temptress. She clasped my knees with her soft white arms, laying her face against my rough riding-boots, and swearing everlasting loyalty and love; and gazing down, I drank her witchery until it ran through and through my body, warm, like rich wine, and the blood in my veins waxed hotter and hotter.

I was no saint, and Madame's was an allurementscarce to be withstood by mortal man. My heart leaped riotously. All my shreds of honour and honourable pride fled before my one desire as chaff before the wind, and to gain Madame la Duchesse for my wife I was ready to sell my soul a thousand times. I was no longer the Audran de Championnet who an hour ago had glared at Dubois as though he were a thing unfit to live, but Audran de Championnet the fallen, the bravo, the willing thief and murderer, and a woman had loosed my passions until I cared not the fling of a coin what evil my sword and my subtlety might work so long as she became mine own. 'Tis ever thus! A woman is a spur driving

a man towards Heaven or Damnation, and by my soul, that night at the Luxembourg, Madame started me most gaily down the latter road. Stooping, I drew her up to me, and crushed her to my breast; and while her lips clung to mine the bell began slowly to toll the hour.

"Audran, you will be true?" she whispered, letting her hand stray over my neck. "Monseigneur may depend on you to accomplish this mission?"

She flung back her head and gazed upon my face with great, shining eyes.

"I will do it," I answered, "for your sake, Madame!"

Next moment a little gold crucifix was pressed against my burning lips.

"Swear that you will not fail me," she murmured.

"If Madame gives me herself?"

"I am yours now!" she replied, nestling closer; "and when you come back, Audran, you shall claim me from Monseigneur as your wife!"

"And you will marry me?" I asked.

"I promise," Madame la Duchesse whispered.

She held the crucifix again to my lips, and I took the oath.

Immediately the words were spoken she rustled away from me, the door opened, and Philippe d'Orléans entered.

"What, in darkness?" he exclaimed. "Fie, Madame; your imprudence surpasses your modesty."

"Modesty's a poor thing, and out of place nowadays!" returned Madame la Duchesse. "M. le Vicomte has been making love to me."

And she lied so charmingly that I laughed aloud.

"Indeed! This is serious!" exclaimed the Regent, crossing the chamber to stand within the circle of warm firelight.

"It was exquisite while it lasted, Monseigneur," Madame's voice rippled on. "What a pity Audran is so poor?"

"Why, Duchesse?" he demanded.

"Because if he were rich I might marry him," she answered, sliding backward to the door, and tossing a kiss at me with shimmering fingers. "Farewell, mon père; good-night, mon preux chevalier. You will not forget?"

She vanished, and I listened to the light tripping of her dainty feet along the corridors until the sound died away into silence. Then, for the third time, I lifted my hat and cloak.

"Monseigneur, I am ready."

"For what, Vicomte?"

"To play the devil with Silvain de Cheverny and the Chevalier's intrigue!" I replied.

"I anticipated this," he said, and smiling with fascinating geniality, M. le Duc commenced to play with his rings in deep reflection.

"Dubois has already left the Luxembourg for the Bastille with de Cheverny's pardon," he continued, after a long pause. "I have directed the guards to accompany Monsieur Silvain to the three cross-roads, where a sign-post points to Pontigny, his first likely halting-place if he makes towards the Chevalier's château."

"I know it well, Monseigneur," I replied.

"Then you had better choose a horse from my stables, and set forth without delay. When all is over, you shall claim your own reward. Au revoir, Monsieur, and luck smile on you!"

I bowed, and retired from his presence.

CHAPTER III

THE MIDNIGHT RIDE TO PONTIGNY

AT the end of the great corridor lounged a man very elegantly dressed in white satin, and as I passed him I saw that he was M. le Comte d'Anquital, a brilliant rascal with whom I once had the pleasure of fighting a duel; and, lightly touching my shoulder ere I descended the stair, he assumed an insolent air of mockery, and presumed to twit me on my very long interview with Madame la Duchesse de Berri.

"What brought you here, Vicomte?" he cried.

"My legs, Monsieur le Comte," I replied. "I was too poor to borrow a horse."

"Perhaps Madame de Berri will buy you one," laughed he.

"Why should she?" I inquired.

"Well," he returned, "when Madame honours a gentleman by allowing him to remain in her company for so long a time as you have spent with her in the card-chamber, she is generally prodigal with her gifts, as she is extremely catholic in her loves."

"M. le Comte!" I exclaimed.

"You to-day—another to-morrow," he said, with a laugh and a sneer.

I did not speak: I looked at him—then, raising my hand, I struck him across the mouth with such excellent ill-will that he went sprawling along the corridor, while I pursued my way to the stables, wrapping my cloak around me as I hastened on.

The grooms received me with deference—they had heard of de Championnet, and there was a look in my eyes that night which inspired fear. I chose a powerful racy Limousin of extraordinary beauty, long in the neck, with a sloping shoulder, a superb chest, swelling scarlet nostrils, and a flaming eye that might have belonged to an angry lion; and when they led her out upon the snow I immediately mounted, and a moment later was clear of the Luxembourg. In less than twenty minutes I turned in my saddle to watch the lights of Paris growing fainter and dimmer amid the wintry haze which hung as a cloud around the city, and then I let the mare race merrily down the white, glittering road.

The storm had ceased, but a bitter wind, sharpened by frost, cut my face and lips; not that I cared a curse, for the memory of Madame la Duchesse kept my heart warm and my body a-tingling. As

for M. le Comte d'Anquital, I looked forward to winning satisfaction from him at the point of my rapier when my mission was accomplished. Sang-Dieu! how the thought of that time sent the hot blood rioting in my veins! To call her mine, to claim her as my wife in the face of all France, what a day for the Vicomte de Championnet! But if d'Anquital's sneer held truth—"You to-day—another to-morrow!" The words burnt into my brain and maddened me to fury. "If Madame is fooling me, I will kill her!" I cried aloud, and in my passion I touched the mare sharply with my spurs, causing her to scream in wild rage and flash onward, bathed in sweat, like a phantom of the lone, starry night. Above us glowed a great mellow moon, Sirius flared white and pure in the deep purple heavens, and Capella was a diamond set in iolite. Lyra gleamed beyond the Milky Way, and the red planet Mars, hanging low, shone like a ruby mid a myriad lesser lanthorns of the silent dome. Beneath the mare's quick hoofs crackled the crisp, frozen snow, and the laden bushes which fringed the road glittered with a filigree of gold and silver when the orange moon, mounting higher, bathed the chaste country in a wondrous radiance—indescribably soft and delightful.

It was a night perfumed by the breath of romance,

and I bethought me, for the first time, of the illimitable peril of my mission. I was riding to Pontigny with a loose rein and a careless heart that I might send Silvain de Cheverny's soul to Purgatory. But if he proved the better man, and spilled my life upon the snow, what would Madame la Duchesse do? "You to-day—another to-morrow." Peste! how the taunt still stung me! Perhaps M. le Comte was right; she would forget that such a man as Audran de Championnet had chosen the path of shame for her sake, and seek solace in listening to some other fool's wooing. I trampled on the dread, and turned my thoughts to the Château de Cheverny, and to the old Chevalier. I had heard of him as the most extraordinary gentleman in France—subtle, unscrupulous, scheming—a recluse who had once ruffled around Paris as a beau and a libertine, and it struck me that my dealings with him were likely to be a thousand times more dangerous than my proposed quarrel and duel with his nephew Silvain.

And yet peril had ever a charm for me, and even though I knew that I rode to my death, I was never the rogue to swing my horse round and save my neck by prudence. Nay, by my soul, no man in Europe, friend or foe, dared call me faithless or a coward; and though Death might wait for me at the Château de Cheverny, I was none the less deter-

mined to prove my loyalty to Madame la Duchesse de Berri, even at the price of my honour.

The wind had risen when I reached the sign-post, and the frost was so intense that I made my way to a cottage some little distance down the Pontigny road. I beat on the door with my riding-whip, and a woman appeared, very stout and scarlet-faced.

"Is this an inn?" I asked.

"Nay, Monsieur; but there is one at Pontigny, four leagues hence."

"Will you allow me to rest here awhile?"

"Certainly, Monsieur. I will put your horse in the shed."

"A million thanks," I replied, "but I will stable her myself."

"As Monsieur pleases," she said, and guided me to the shed, where another horse was stalled—a raw-boned, ugly beast, which might have been any age from twenty to thirty.

"This is our Noé!" announced the woman, exhibiting much pride. "He once belonged to M. le Marquis de Saint Arnaud, whose château lies near. My husband is in the service of M. le Marquis, and Noé draws wood. There, Monsieur, your beautiful animal is now amid great comfort. Come into the house, Monsieur."

I followed her, and lounged in a wooden chair by

the fire, listening intently for the sound of M. le Duc d'Orléans's guards. At last I heard voices, and gazing from the window, my eyes fell upon several soldiers in glittering cuirasses, standing dismounted by the sign-post. Presently they sprang on their horses and galloped away towards Paris, leaving a dark figure alone at the crossroads. It was, without doubt, Silvain de Cheverny. He raised a hand and shook it after the retreating guards, then came striding past the cottage, wrapped in a long cloak which trailed about his heels.

"So-ho, Monsieur Silvain!" I muttered. "You travel late, mon ami, and I will give you excellent time to reach Pontigny before presenting myself to you!"

While I mused he vanished, and the woman brought me wine. Lolling in my seat, I played with my glass, and pictured de Cheverny tramping alone down the white, crusted road,—de Cheverny, the man I had come out to kill. He had once been my comrade, and I remember, as though 'twere yesterday, how Monsieur Silvain, while a lieutenant in the guards, became enamoured of a certain Mademoiselle Crespigny, the pretty daughter of some strolling player; but Mademoiselle preferred another to Silvain, who, finding the lovers sauntering together one night near the Cathedral of Notre-

Dame as he swung home full of wine from a tavern, pulled out his rapier, and, in a fit of mad passion, ran them both through the heart. De Cheverny instantly fled, or he would have graced the scaffold, for the girl's lover had powerful friends; and it passed my comprehension how Dubois could have learned that Silvain was again in Paris, and planned so masterly a plot against the Chevalier through his nephew's death. And M. l'Abbé had chosen me as his instrument. I pondered long. Silvain might have been a very black scoundrel, but there was no reason why repentance should not have laid a chastening hand upon him. A man may be a villain to-day and a saint ten years hence. Yet, knowing that de Cheverny led a desperately low life during his three years with the Royal Guards, I had a strong thought that the leper was still unclean. And so it proved. For as I sipped my wine a horse neighed, and fearing my mare was in mischief, I rose, opened the door, and quietly made my way round to the shed. An oath dropped hot from my lips, and out flashed my rapier—for, by my heart's blood, there was Monsieur Silvain leading forth M. le Duc d'Orléans's chestnut mare!

"Holà, rascal!" I roared. "Stop! stop!" And then I cursed him with a million curses as he laughed insolently, flung his leg 'cross the saddle, and, set-

ting his feet in the stirrups, shook the reins, and was gone down the road 'fore ever I could reach him with my savage, lunging blade.

"Tricked, by St. Aignan!" I snarled, stamping my heel till the spur rang on the frozen snow. "So Monsieur Silvain is a robber as well as a murderer! We are a pair well matched!"

The hoofs of the mare sounded light and clear as the far-away tinkling of silver bells, and dragging old Noé from his warm shed I mounted him, and, with only my sword and a halter to guide his head, I spurred the poor brute to a roystering, staggering gallop. And, upon my soul, he possessed an excellent spirit, for in less than an hour the hostelry lights of the little village of Pontigny glowed rosily out against the bitter night; and drawing Noé to a halt, I bawled to a groom who lounged in the porch. He came towards me, staring.

"Is anyone within?" I asked, jerking my thumb towards the hostelry window.

"A gentleman, Monsieur!"

"When did he arrive?" I demanded.

"Twenty minutes ago, Monsieur."

"Riding a chestnut mare?"

The man gave a brisk affirmative, and I rubbed my hands with intense satisfaction. Silvain was mine! I had him like a wolf in a trap: and after

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giving the groom instructions to send back Noé to his owner with a gold louis or two, which I could ill-spare from my scanty pocket, I kicked open the door of the hostelry and swaggered in.

CHAPTER IV

THE DUEL AT NIGHT

SILVAIN DE CHEVERNY was alone in the wainscoted chamber.

"Good-evening to you, Monsieur!" I cried, flinging down my hat and cloak and stamping the snow from my heavy boots. "Have you a memory of Audran de Championnet?"

De Cheverny swung round to face me, and I was astonished at the extraordinary transformation of his personality. His under-lip drooped; his dull, wine-reddened eyes burned like rubies under his shaggy brows; and his cheeks were purple and scarlet. It was the countenance of a debauchee and a voluptuary; and gazing at his full-blooded, loose-limbed form, I caught myself wondering how, if I killed the rogue, it would be possible sufficiently to disguise my own lean body and sun-tanned visage into a likeness of Monsieur Silvain.

"Audran de Championnet?" he muttered, in a low, hoarse whisper. "My great God!"

"You seem startled to see me, Monsieur," I replied. "Have I interrupted your refection? Come, allow me to join you in a flask of Rousillon. Where are the maids?"

"There is one without!" he growled, "but she will not wait on me. I was about to give her a kiss in courtesy, when she ran off, and has not reappeared. Modesty's rampant here!"

"Ha! A kiss in courtesy!" I reflected. "You were ever a gay dog, de Cheverny! Do you remember that night at the 'Fleur-de-Lys'?"

His eyes closed in ecstasy.

"And your little esclandre with Mademoiselle la Madeleine, as Rochfort christened her?"

The beast wriggled in delight.

"And the orgie at the Château de Sainte Mathilde?"

He licked his lips and sighed.

"You have a good memory, Vicomte!"

"An excellent one, Monsieur. It is sometimes a pity to possess a good memory. So many things in life are better forgotten!"

I spoke calmly, and began to pull off my boots, but letting the tail of my eye trail over Silvain's face, I noted that his own scarlet-rimmed orbs were regarding me with such an expression of hate and distrust, that I judged it well to watch his move-

ments. Crossing the chamber, I opened the door and called for supper and some Rousillon. Presently the maid appeared, and I was soon settling down to an extremely choice repast, when she screamed, and there was Monsieur de Cheverny, with an arm about her waist, struggling hard for a kiss. Here was my chance for a quarrel with him.

"Ah-ha, I have you this time," he cried, dragging her to his knee, and striving to pull her face down to his swollen, wine-sodden lips. "Look, de Championnet, I've mastered her! Watch me make love to her! Take this kiss, sweetheart, and this, and this!"

"Let the girl go!" I cried, glaring angrily at the rascal.

"Nay!" he answered, "not by your command, M. le Vicomte!" and Monsieur Silvain pressed his lips again to the maid's cheek.

"Then I'll make you!" I growled, rising from my seat and getting my rapier bare. But he held the girl fast, and though she wept and struck him with her hands, he would have won another kiss had I not given him the pommel of my sword with all my strength, and sliding from his chair, Silvain crashed to the floor, blood gushing from his mouth, while the maid rushed out of the chamber. The host came running in, and I bade him begone. At

first he demurred, and I was forced to make towards him with my rapier before he vanished and left me alone to work my will upon Silvain de Cheverny. For a little while I sat watching him, and drank my Rousillon very slowly, keeping my eyes on Monsieur, and wondering when his swoon would pass. I had caught his every gesture while we talked together. I now had leisure to observe his sloven dress, his rough, ill-shaven chin, and I thought, after all, it might not be so difficult to play his part at the Château de Cheverny—to cheat the Chevalier, and to worm the letters incriminating Cardinal Alberoni and other intriguers from his possession. It would have been easy to kill Silvain while he lay insensible ; but although I allowed my rapier-point to creep nearer and nearer to his coarse throat, my heart refused to let me make the thrust. No, he should fight me in a duel to the death ! Yet there was a wondrous fascination in watching the bright ribbon of steel flash to and fro, and quiver above Monsieur's broad, heaving breast. At last he sighed, his eyes unclosed, and after I had given him wine, he arose, scowling, and immediately tried to get free his sword.

“ Wait a little, mon ami ! ” I said. “ Allow your strength to return. Then I will offer you satisfaction ! ”

He had the grace to make an elaborate bow, and I pushed the flask of Rousillon close to his elbow.

"Drink, Monsieur," I said, proceeding with my supper, and *ma foi!* in ten minutes the wine was gone, and Silvain, sinking back in his chair, slept.

Leaning my arms on the table, I looked at him and laughed—he was so strange, so grotesque a picture. Drunken stupor lay heavy on his face—his perruque was awry, and his Malines ruffles were as filthy as sin. He had spilt the Rousillon over his soiled coat of white satin—a relic, I doubt not, of better days,—and the blood from his mouth had dried upon his chin and splashed his shirt crimson. An hour passed, the hostelry was silent, and some neighbouring clock tolled solemnly. One! Two!

I started. How the time had flown! Four hours ago Madame la Duchesse was lying in my arms, and now here was I waiting for Silvain de Cheverny to awake that I might take his life. After a while I shook him, and he sufficiently recovered his wits to be extremely quarrelsome.

"You insulted me, Vicomte!" he began. "I demand satisfaction."

"You shall have it, Monsieur." I returned. "Do you prefer swords?"

He bowed.

"Yes, swords, and I hope to run you through the heart!"

I smiled contemptuously, and Silvain flew into a passion.

"I'll spill your blood or die!" he snarled, shaking his fist in my face. "Come outside, Vicomte, and I promise you the snow shall be rosy where your body falls!"

"What if my luck holds and yours proves false, Monsieur?" I said, leaning against the low mantel and gazing at him with a flash of laughter in my eyes.

"Ah!" he breathed, and then again, very softly, so that it could scarce be heard—"Ah!"

His face narrowed, his red orbs gathered a low, cunning gleam of the most intense malice, and suddenly he drew a dice-box from his pocket.

"M. le Vicomte de Championnet!" he murmured, smiling horribly, "why should we go out upon the snow to fight this duel?"

"I shall be happy, Monsieur, to kill you here," I said.

"Let us dice for our lives!" he urged. "Three throws each, and he who throws highest shall take his sword and send it through the loser!"

"A cold-blooded suggestion!" I reflected.

"Are you a coward?" he sneered.

"Are you, Monsieur?" I said, staring at him till his gaze fell.

"Come, we are wasting time," he replied. "The thought of Death seems to frighten you, M. le Vicomte."

"Not at all, but I am always on my guard against treachery," I flashed out. "Well, sit you down, Monsieur de Cheverny, and stake your luck 'gainst mine!"

"You agree?" he cried, with evident delight.

I bent my head, and he pushed the box across the table.

"Nay, you shall throw first!" I said.

"As you please, Vicomte!" he replied, rattling the dice, and tossing them high. "There, by Saint Gris, I've thrown ten!"

"You are certainly in luck," I muttered, taking the box from his quivering hand.

"Be quick, mon ami, be quick!" he cried, the sweat running down his face.

"Only fools hurry!" I remarked; "and no man on earth ever hastened me, Monsieur de Cheverny."

"Throw! throw!" he gasped.

I obeyed, and Silvain gave a little soft chuckle of unutterable rapture.

"Seven!" he cooed, sweeping the dice again into the box and flinging them out with a laugh.

"Ten for the second time," I said ; " that seems strange."

"Nay, I am winning fairly, Vicomte !" he said, flushing scarlet, and drawing back his lips. " Do you dare call me cheat ? "

"Wait !" I replied, and threw up the dice. They came down with a tinkling clatter, and, rolling over, gave me no more than six. De Cheverny shouted aloud.

"You appear extremely anxious to feel your blade running into my body, Monsieur," I said, "but if I recollect aright, it was ever ready to kill the defenceless. Have you forgotten the night when you met Mademoiselle Crespigny and the Comte de Murat by Notre Dame ? Ah ! you were fortunate in escaping from Paris after that double murder. You fled to England, I believe ? But why did you return, my dear de Cheverny ? Nay, do not rise ; we must conclude our game of Death with these dice. It is your throw !"

His face was grey with passion, and the great veins sprang up like red weals leaping under the lash of a whip. He stretched forth both his hands towards my throat, his fingers working like the claws of an angry bear, his eyes sparkling like jets of fire, and I sprang to my feet, or he would have choked my life out as soon as not. Finding me wary, he

ripped the rapier from his side and made a thrust at my body across the table.

"I want your blood!" he hissed, and, leaning forward, spat in my face.

This insult counterbalanced mine so completely, that I had a thirsty longing to see the rascal die, but I was too old a duellist to risk a fight in the hostelry. Beating down Monsieur Silvain's lunges, I bade him accompany me to a secluded spot, clear of Pontigny, and he was scarcely so drunk with madness as to be utterly blind to the wisdom of my admonition. Throwing open the door, he lurched out into the snow, and pulling on my boots and snatching a lanthorn from the porch, I followed him through the silent, sleeping village. Save for de Cheverny's curses and the muffled tramping of our feet, absolute stillness reigned, and one solitary light glittered from the hostelry like a dancing, crimson star.

When Silvain came to a stand by a little glade, I congratulated him very courteously upon his choice of ground, and as I set down the lanthorn, and commenced to pull off my coat, my mind went a-wandering to Madame la Duchesse. Amid my strong passionate memories of her charm and loveliness, the bloody, inevitable duel faded away from my thoughts, and, strange as it may seem, I was stripped

and the cold wind biting my face and breast before my dreamy vision of Madame passed, and de Cheverny's presence reminded me that for her sake I must take his life. While I gazed at him, the old swash-buckling fascination of staking my blood on a twirl of my rapier got hold of me again, and, with the unconquered duellist's wicked joy, I laughed quietly—why, I know not,—and whipped the keen air with my whistling blade until it flashed and glimmered like a stream of fire.

Around the sparkling ribbon of turf on which we stood, a fringe of snow-powdered firs and brambles rustled in the wind, and through these crept the moonrays to play in golden circles round our feet. A little distance from Silvain was the lanthorn, and I remember how the bright, steady glow clung to his evil face, and changed his shirt from dirty-white to scarlet.

While we waited, a hare limped trembling past, halting an instant in his fright, and the gay challenge of a stag came rolling up the valley. Once more silence fell. De Cheverny was shivering, and as I bared my right arm and slipped forward to engage him, I noted that his eyes were no longer full of fire, but had turned to a lustrous, glittering green. I was wondering whether I looked so fierce—so wolfish as he, when our blades met, and for a moment

he pressed me hard with some swift, low lunges in a manner surprisingly fine. Pardieu ! I give you my word that his first assault drove me back, step by step, until my old famous upper-thrust, flashing like a streak of flame over his guard, made him recollect he was dealing with Audran de Championnet.

We were shifting our position rapidly—sometimes the brilliant moonbeams would be glimmering on my face, sometimes on de Cheverny's, and at every quick movement my spurs sent the snow spurting upward in miniature showers. It was a beautiful duel, and all the time I kept wondering where I should pink Silvain first. He panted like a stag, but came upon me with such excellent spirit that I was loth to kill him in a hurry. Lunge ! lunge ! lunge ! He stuck at it until his arm tired, and I asked him whether he would like a breather. The fool took my question as the bitterest insult, though he was now as sober as myself.

“ You dog ! you coward ! ” he gasped. “ Do you want to run away ? ”

“ Nay, I am not a thief who steals horses ! ” I replied, lightly tripping back and whirling his thrusts aside, when he re-engaged me with fresh fury. “ The chestnut mare you filched from the shed by the crossroads belongs to me, Monsieur,

and I call you a low thief ! Do you hear ? A thief and a murderer ! ”

He uttered a cry which trailed into the snarl of a wolf, and breaking through my guard by a magnificent lunge, the rogue nearly drew first blood, for I felt his blade tear a long rent in my shirt. Next breath I gave him my point in his shoulder, and heathed forth from his lips a lingering howl of rage. We were fighting desperately, and, by Saint Agnan, Monsieur de Cheverny displayed a rash valour that forced me to admire his daring mode of attack, his careless bravado, and his extraordinary tenacity. But hate strengthens even a strong arm, and Silvain loathed me with a passion akin to madness. His staring eyes, red in the lanthorn-glow, green in the moon-rays, were for ever fixed on mine, and so superb were his swift, low lunges that twice he nearly won my life. Then of a sudden I slipped, and here the rascal's iniquity was revealed in all its nakedness, for 'fore I could recover he leapt forward with the dash of a tiger, and had I not shown marvellous fencing, he would have stabbed me without hesitation where I lay. But somehow I staggered again to my feet just as the moon, mounting higher, shone full on his face, and parrying thrice, I made a demi-volte, and as his blade shot like a streak of light past my ear, I ran him through the

neck! He threw his arms wide, a gush of blood flashed over his broad, heaving breast, crimsoning his shirt from throat to waist; then he swayed, gasped two or three times, and clapping both hands to the wound, spun slowly round, and sank down upon the snow.

Mon Dieu, what a deathly silence reigned! And how bitter the night had grown! I cleansed my rapier, and returned it to the sheath, slipped on my coat, and then, remembering I was no longer the Vicomte de Championnet but Silvain de Cheverny, I bent over my victim, dragged one reddened hand from his throat, and robbed the stiff fingers of four rings, among them the signet mentioned by M. le Duc d'Orléans, bearing the arms of the old Chevalier. Then I searched his person, and fetched forth some papers and a small jewelled locket, held by a golden chain. These things I thrust into my pockets, and carefully removing his linen, I arrayed him in my own shirt, with the name "Audran de Championnet" embroidered on the shoulder. The shirt was old, and my mother had spent many an hour over that silken embroidery, but there are times when one forgets a mother's love, even when she is in heaven, and this was no night for wasting moments by soliloquy or regret.

I was a man: I had a purpose, and was deter-

mined that naught on earth should alter it, though when I bent down to strip Monsieur de Cheverny, and saw that the sweat on his face had frozen to ice and glittered like a mask of crystal—when I found that the blood on his breast was hard and slippery as glass—when I twirled my handkerchief around his throat to hide the ghastly wound, I was seized with a great horror, and for the first time since my childhood I tasted fear. My soul turned sick within me while I exchanged perruques, and rapiers, and money with the Thing that lay so still upon the snow, until I was assured that when the body was found all Paris would ring with the news that M. le Vicomte de Championnet had been killed in a duel at Pontigny.

Silvain's face, now tranquil in death, certainly might easily be mistaken for mine, and I cherished high hopes of my fraud, while I dressed myself in one or two of Monsieur de Cheverny's garments by the glow of the lanthorn until my disguise and his were complete ; and then I hastened back to the hostelry as though the Devil were on my trail. And I doubt not that he was.

The light in the chamber was dim, and snatching up my cloak, I ran out again into the brilliant night—all radiant with stars, and the golden glory of the full, yellow moon. Stealing to the shed, I led forth

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M. le Duc's chestnut mare, and swiftly bridling her, I leapt to the saddle and sped lightly down the road. Sometimes her hoofs made a sound as of distant thunder where the snow was thick and powdery—sometimes they rang on ice like chiming bells, very loud and extraordinarily musical, and the keen wind cut me to the bone. I rode on and on, and so the night passed.

CHAPTER V

CHEVERNY

IT was a far journey to Cheverny, and most of the time I was riding through light snowstorms, and longing to gain the shelter of the château ; for now I had killed Silvain I was ripe for any fresh rascality which might come in my way. There was the Chevalier to fool ! Well, that must be done, and I think I may say I was a man of wit—of resource—of extremely cool insolence and easy address, so a fear of detection and inglorious exposure never so much as entered my mind. No, I rode along with a calm, even resolution to go through my task and win Madame la Duchesse at all costs. And undoubtedly Madame was worth the winning. I hungered for her, and when the Château de Cheverny came in sight I swore that I would play the liar and the traitor well. Below me, as I drew rein on the bosom of the hill, lay a small straggling village, compassed about by woods, and cut in twain by a glittering, silvery stream. The château,

low, irregular, and quaintly gabled, crouched at the head of the valley, and I gazed long upon it before proceeding on my way. In the centre of the village stood a smithy, and a man lurking about the door opened his eyes, as I passed, with the most intense interest.

"What is the matter, my friend?" I cried, wagging my head at him. "One would think you saw a ghost!"

"Mille diables, it is Monsieur Silvain!" he muttered. "He is come back again!" And, laughing loudly, I rode on, excellently pleased. "Come," I soliloquised, "this promises to develop into a superb jest. If these louts take me for Silvain de Cheverny, why should not the Chevalier likewise fall under the same misapprehension?"

And when the lodge-keeper at the château exhibited a similar surprise, I was still further encouraged and delighted. Yet I noted that these men showed no pleasure at my arrival. They did not rush forward with a warm welcome or a cheery word, neither did their faces lighten; so I judged Monsieur Silvain had been anything but beloved by the country-folk of Cheverny. One or two grooms and some maids appeared as I rattled into the courtyard of the château, all gazing curiously at me; and, sliding from the saddle, I flung the reins to a

stable-boy and bade him take good care of M. le Duc's mare. Then, bracing my heart high, I swung around to the terrace, and banged upon the great entrance door as though 'twere already my own. A man dressed in a livery of cream and claret admitted me, and I gave him my cloak and hat.

"Where is M. le Chevalier?" I cried.

"In his room, Monsieur Silvain," replied the servant.

"Ah, you know me, then!" I replied. "How long is it since I left Cheverny?"

"Ten years, Monsieur."

"Ten years! How time flies!" I reflected. "You say the Chevalier is in his room. Lead me to him!"

I followed the man up a broad, massive stair, then through a magnificent corridor hung with some very choice portraits, and halted at his heels by a little curtained door. From within came the noise of a devil of a racket, and, catching the man's sleeve, I twirled him around before he could enter.

"What's doing here?" I whispered. "A duel, a mêlée with swords, or a drunken carousal?"

"Monsieur," he replied, "it is cocks."

"Cocks?" I gasped.

"Yes, Monsieur; they are fighting."

And I stood rooted to the floor in my amaze-

ment. The din was so deafening that M. le Chevalier's man stopped his ears ; and, gently opening the door, I thrust aside the hangings and peeped in. Ma foi ! what a sight met my eyes ! The Chevalier de Cheverny, propped and supported by cushions and pillows, sat in his bed, beating the air with his fists and swearing in a manner that astonished me. I had heard Monsieur the Regent rattle off a fine string of oaths, and Dubois curse until he choked—I had listened to M. le Duc de Brancas while he swore in three tongues ; but, on my soul, never did I hearken to such a flame of white-hot blasphemy as shot from the lips of M. le Chevalier.

His high-toned, delicate voice was all of a quiver with passion ; his small light eyes darted fire ; and his singularly beautiful face, though pale as marble, streamed with sweat ; while his lean body, dressed in a blue and yellow night-robe, seemed to be writhing like a python. Upon his head was set a crimson cap, and a few wisps of silvery hair strayed over his brow or crept down around his ears. Beyond all doubt, the Chevalier de Cheverny was an extremely striking and remarkable personage, and the more he cursed and raved the greater became my wonder that so eminently-refined a gentleman in appearance should descend to the language of the canaille, and revel in such peculiar sport.

In the centre of the room, on a strip of rich Algiers carpet, two cocks were fighting furiously, and behind each knelt a valet, one in the de Cheverny livery, and the other arrayed in crimson and daffodil. Opposite the Chevalier, and standing with his legs thrown wide apart, was a gentleman whose fascinating countenance and delightful demeanor might have won any woman's heart, or man's either, for that matter, and I felt a wonderful admiration towards him as I gazed upon his face, full of a reckless humour—a wealth of courage and a strength which in some gifted natures underlies a mask of frivolity hard to dispel. He was tall and slim, extraordinarily handsome, with a pair of big bright eyes that danced like diamonds, and while I stared at him the longing to feel his rapier grind against mine came into my heart, and I knew that here was one worthy to engage the best duellist in France.

I would have sworn Monsieur could fence—his pose, his lithe, swinging movements—his quick, flashing glance, revealed to the imaginative eye a very finished swordsman, and the longer I watched him the greater grew my admiration for his magnificent presence and inimitable geniality. He was young: he wore his own hair, of a rich chestnut colour; his coat was of purple velvet, his vest of cream and rose, his breeches of white satin, and at

his side hung a beautiful rapier in a sheath of scarlet leather. Glancing down at my own rags, I flushed with shame to see my poverty, then laughed low, and listened to the betting on the fighting-cocks, that sprang and fluttered and warred upon the Algiers rug until the floor was strewn with feathers and spattered with blood.

The face of the valet in crimson and daffodil, as he shuffled around on his hands and knees, making a queer clucking noise to encourage the birds, was something to see, and long 'fore I knew his master's name I guessed the fellow was an Englishman.

"A hundred louis on Zozime, M. le Marquis!" cried the Chevalier.

"Two on Saint Peter!" replied the stranger. "Burn my blood, Chevalier, you like your stakes high!"

"Zozime wins—he wins! I will lay three on him!" screamed de Cheverny. "Will you make the bets even?"

"No, damned if I do, Saint Peter is getting stripped!" cried M. le Marquis, fanning his face with a handkerchief of Alençon lace, which diffused a thick perfume of mingled jasmine and Parma violet. "His breast feathers are gone, but the old devil is game, and so he'll die. Well, 'tis a gentleman's death, and I wish for no better myself!"

"Stand in my path and you shall have it, M. le Marquis!" I murmured, 'neath my breath, for somehow the swift thought tore at my heart that this man might be my foe, and that in fooling the Chevalier I should also have to deal with his brilliant guest. Well, there is no stopping the wheel of fate, and shrugging my shoulders with the old careless nonchalance which has always proved my truest comrade, I let my left hand fall limp, and patted my rapier caressingly.

The birds fought on amid bets and laughter, and curses, and the spirit of the gambler within me gave my soul no rest, and I had a great thirst to lay all I possessed on the black and scarlet cock named Zozime.

"My Saint Peter is himself again, and, by the Heaven above me, he'll win yet, M. le Chevalier!" cried the Marquis. "Five hundred louis to three that he gives the death-stroke!"

"Six hundred on Zozime," said the Chevalier. "Look, Monsieur, your bird's wing seems broken. Ah, now we shall see the end of it!"

The black and scarlet cock was prowling around Saint Peter, his head held low, his claws gripping the Algiers rug, and both wings raised a little above his back; while the other bird, clucking ferociously, stood on one leg, his right spur tucked close to his

breast, awaiting the chance to strike. It soon came. Zozime flew high and descended with a splutter of fury upon his enemy; but Saint Peter fluttered aside, escaping with a deep scratch in the neck, from which blood flowed freely.

"Damn!" cried the Marquis, and the Chevalier gave a low, rippling chuckle, stretching forth his hands and clawing the air in an ecstasy of delight.

I could restrain myself no longer.

"Ten louis on M. le Chevalier's cock!" I shouted, springing into the chamber, and at that very moment Zozime ran recklessly in, and Saint Peter, hovering above him, swooped down like a falcon, and split his head apart with a blow that sounded as a pebble thrown against glass.

"Mon Dieu, you have won!" cried the Chevalier.

"Yes, I have won," said M. le Marquis, and then all eyes were turned on me. Those of de Cheverny glittered like crystal—a smile played across his thin lips, and without exhibiting the slightest surprise he welcomed me in a manner neither cold nor warm.

"It is Silvain!" he remarked, as though his nephew were no stranger. "Monsieur de Cheverny: Monsieur le Marquis de Merivale!"

I bowed, the Marquis acknowledged my courtesy with great elegance, and this was our introduction

beneath the roof of the château, which in time, if I played my cards aright, might be my own. Before me lay the dead bird on which I had staked my ten louis, and M. le Chevalier's valet busied himself in scraping together the scattered feathers that littered the chamber from end to end, while M. le Marquis favoured his man with a string of instructions which turned me dizzy.

"Michael," he said, "you may take Saint Peter away, give him a few grains of the white powder, wash his wounds, bind up his wing, anoint him with balsam, then make him swallow a few drops of brandy and put him into the box lined with white silk. Do not leave him for one moment until I come to relieve you, and, with the Chevalier's permission, I will have him removed to my room, that I may be able to glance at him once or twice every hour during the night. I could not, I fear, exhibit a similar devotion towards a wife, but then a wife is not a fighting-cock. Wait a moment, Michael; you seem in the devil of a hurry," rattled on M. le Marquis, taking his bird from the valet and examining the wounds through a quizzing-glass. "God help me, I forgot to mention that among my shirts you will discover a soothing powder recommended by Lucon of London. It must be given the cock at once, and when he is safe in his box be careful to place a small

glass of liqueur brandy at the right-hand corner. Dilute it with water. I have known Saint Peter turn a calm night into a bacchanalian carousal after a victory of this kind. Take him and go! M. le Chevalier, I have enjoyed a very delightful hour, and I hope to heaven Mademoiselle Aurélie may not hear of it. By my pure soul, she has caught us!"

"Yes, I have caught you, M. le Marquis! At your old sport again! How dare you disobey my commands? How dare you force cocks to fight in my father's chamber—you and your friends? It is shameful, and, by Sainte Marie, I've more than half a mind to make you all smart for your pleasure!" and the lash of a man's riding-whip hissed perilously near the Marquis de Merivale's shoulders and then flicked out at the grinning visage of the old Chevalier, who swiftly dived under the coverlet; while the valets, laughing from ear to ear, darted away through the door as Mademoiselle made a pretence of cutting at their calves.

Pardieu, never in my life had I seen so superb a girl! As she stood there in her magnificent passion, beating the air with her whip and stamping one little foot at the Chevalier and M. le Marquis, I found leisure to drink in her extraordinary beauty, and to wonder at the delightful abandon of her

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the
supple, perfect form. She was dressed in a white riding-habit, slashed across the bosom with scarlet and silver, and a trifle the worse for wear and tear ; her hat clung jauntily to a head that rippled with short, russet-gold hair, and her face, browned by a life's revelling amid heaven's winds and sun-rays, and warmed now by the keen sting of winter, was full of a charm that crept into a man's heart like a thief in the night. Her brilliant eyes, though iolite in hue, were almost iridescent in their passion, and her crimson lips beyond description as they parted, showed her little gleaming teeth that grinded very prettily all the while.

" Sacré ! " I murmured, " the husband who could master her would be hard to find. Madame la Duchesse has a great spirit, but Mademoiselle Aurélie is the devil of a woman ! "

M. le Marquis allowed her temper to cool, smiling and bowing with exasperating imperturbability ; and then she swung round on me, still cracking her whip, and surveyed me as though she wondered why I met her gaze so well.

" It is really too bad of you, Messieurs ! " she said. " My father is in no fit state to see cocks fight, though I'll swear he's the worst of the three. And what men can see in such sport, Heaven only knows ! This mess of feathers—these splashes of blood—

faugh, 'tis maddening! Will this gentleman dine with us to-night?" she inquired, turning swiftly on the Chevalier.

"My angel, it is Silvain!" cooed M. le Chevalier, from amid his pillows. "Of course he will dine with us! He is our guest."

"Aurélie!" I muttered, glancing perplexedly around, and then my lips were sealed. She approached, quivering with passion, and I should scarcely have been surprised had she spat in my face.

"My nephew Silvain; my daughter Aurélie," murmured the Chevalier, in his soft, mocking tones. "Don't you remember one another? You used to be such lovers once on a time!"

And then I knew that Aurélie loathed the very name of Silvain de Cheverny.

"Yes," she said, "I remember him. M. le Marquis, did you bring this man here?"

"Mademoiselle, I made his acquaintance at the will of M. le Chevalier," returned the Englishman, laughing across the room at me, and at that instant a little moan came from betwixt the teeth of M. de Cheverny: he commenced to shudder, and Aurélie's face, cleansed of all passion, might have been that of a saint as she sprang to the bed, and, stooping, lifted the old man's body in her strong young arms, and made his white cheek rest against her own.

"Fetch me the red phial, M. le Marquis!" she whispered, stretching out one hand. "Be quick! Now open his lips and pour a few drops down his throat. Ten thousand thanks! Do not allow your cocks to fight again in this chamber. The excitement was too much. He is old—and my father. Promise me, Monsieur; you are a man of honour and a gentleman!"

"Mademoiselle, rather than this had happened, I would have lost my right hand," said the Marquis. "Is there aught else I can do?"

She shook her head; her hat fell to the floor, and a long stream of wintry sunlight, stealing through the mullioned window, touched her hair with rippling, sparkling gold, and her great eyes were iolite again, and shone like bright, soft stars.

"Leave us, Monsieur!" she murmured, and, bowing with exquisite grace, M. le Marquis de Merivale quitted the room. I did not follow him, but leaned negligently against the wall, watching Mademoiselle as she drew the Chevalier's head still closer to her face, unconscious of my presence.

CHAPTER VI

MADemoisELLE SHOWS HER TEETH

"MADemoisELLE AURÉLIE!" I softly murmur and then again, a little more distinctly—"Ma
moiselle!"

She turned upon me like a flash of light.

"What do you here?" she said, her words falling on my ear as cold and stinging as hailstones. "I know you could not be a gentleman if you tried Monsieur Silvain, and delicacy was never one of your virtues; yet you might, at the least, have followed M. le Marquis from the chamber. But what can one expect of you?"

I saw her lip curl maddeningly, and there was something in her face that lashed me like a thong and made me shrink as though I had been whipped to overwhelming shame.

"Mademoiselle," I stammered, "you are hard on me. You do not treat me as a kinsman. I stayed to beg your friendship, and you offer me nothing but insult."

"And what of yourself?" she flashed out, laying the Chevalier's silvery head back among the pillows. "You are my cousin, and you are heir to Cheverny, but that does not make me hate you less. And your proper place is the Bastille, Monsieur."

"I have come from the Bastille," I replied. "Here is my pardon, signed by the Regent. I am a free man, Mademoiselle, and because in a fit of mad passion I killed M. le Comte de Murat and Mademoiselle Crespigny, who played me false, there is no reason for you to imagine me altogether a villain."

"You were always that!" she said, picking up her hat and tossing it into a corner of the room, and began to see how intense was her loathing for Monsieur Silvain. I needed all my tact, my wit, and my quickness of resource to keep pace with Mademoiselle when she ran back over ground on which I had never travelled, and reminded me of certain early episodes wherein Silvain figured largely in arrogance—in detestable cruelty and in merciless pride; and from her lips I gathered more of his real character than I had ever hoped to glean. She judged him by her girlish recollections, and the ten long years that had rolled away had burned the remembrance of his wickedness and folly upon her brain and heart. It was somewhat hard, even for

me, to play the part of so great a rascal, but I threw myself into a reflex of his personality with such will that, by my soul's salvation, at times I almost forgot I was the Vicomte de Championnet and cringed at Mademoiselle's scorn in a manner which I doubt not caused her vast satisfaction.

"I have never forgotten how you served the state that day down by the old well!" she mused.

"Nor I. Believe me, I have utterly repented."

"And the old blind man—Antoine Coudray—bah! the very thought of your cruelty makes me shudder."

"Mademoiselle, you are pitiless."

"As you were to him!" she cried, with fine contempt. "Monsieur Silvain, do not try to whitewash your reputation. It would crumble at the first touch of your brush. It is enough humiliation for me to realise that you are here, and that I must offer you hospitality."

I bowed, and a little soft laugh sounded from the bed. M. le Chevalier's eyes were wide open, and he had heard every word.

"Aurélié, you shame me!" he said, a deep, wicked smile cutting his venerable face into a thousand wrinkles. "I command you to receive Silvain at Cheverny as an honoured guest. His Highness the Regent has pardoned him."

"His Highness the Regent would pardon the devil!" returned Mademoiselle, glancing at me as though I were a toad on which she longed to stamp her foot. "You have forgotten that M. le Marquis de Merivale is here."

"Silvain's presence will not poison him," reflected the Chevalier.

"Nay; but Monsieur le Marquis is a gentleman," she said.

"Mademoiselle, ma cousine," I ventured, "you remind me of a wasp."

"It is usual for wasps to sting those who offend them," she answered, somewhat wearily.

"Aur lie, bring me the red phial. I am dizzy again," whispered the Chevalier; and all my fury towards Mademoiselle melted away when she rearranged his pillow with a swift tenderness, while he drank the liquid and sat up, a flush momentarily crimsoning his cheeks. She was like Spring hovering round Winter's hoary locks—Spring radiant with beauty, full of rich, warm life, and strength, and love; and as I watched her I think my melancholy eyes must have dragged a shred of pity from her heart, for in a wonderful, sudden manner she took my hand.

"I do not like you, Silvain," she said; "but you've a face that tells me you're something of a

man at heart. I wish your past were cleaner and your manners were better. Will you leave me alone with my father?"

"Mademoiselle—Aurélie," I answered, "I have only been waiting for one kind word." And I retreated from the chamber in haste, lest my familiarity might bring further chastisement by tongue or by riding-whip.

I went down the stair and entered a very beautiful salon. It was empty; and, sinking into a chair, I took up Le Sage's "Gil Blas de Santillane." Mademoiselle's name was written on the title-page, and underneath: "From Merivale, in memory of sweet hours at Cheverny."

"Oh-ho!" I thought, "so Monsieur le Marquis has been sunning himself in the blaze of Mademoiselle's bright eyes. He may be her lover. Well, he is very welcome." And, rising again, I tossed the book down and sauntered out upon the terrace.

Traces of the recent snow lay about the parterre, and the pretty gilded berceaux that in summer-time were smothered by vines and honeysuckles shone desolate and naked in the faint rose-glow of the wintry afternoon sun. Beyond the park lay great woods, and I could see the head of a valley and the quick rush of a silvery stream threading its way through the village of Cheverny. There was a

subtle fascination in the scene ; everything seemed so still, so intensely silent, and the old château behind me threw a vast grotesque shadow over the Parterre. As I walked to and fro my thoughts grew deep and large, and again they roved back to Madame la Duchesse de Berri. Although I had only just returned to France after a lengthy absence, rumours of Madame's participation with M. le Duc d'Orléans in extraordinary gaieties at the Luxembourg and the Palais-Royal were as common as sin in Paris. It was said she had a dozen lovers.

D'Anquital had sneered at her constancy, and my resentment meant a duel on my return, unless he chose to allow the matter to rest. But I never believed these fables of Madame. They were invented by the Regent's enemies, and although I knew her to be gay—to be fond of pleasure—to covet admiration, like all women who love the bright world, I would not for one moment place credence in scandal disseminated by the devotees of that clever little intriguer, Madame la Duchesse du Maine. And God only could tell what plots she might be hatching at Sceaux for the destruction of the Regency.

Long ago, in my palmier days, I had been one of the privileged admitted to the Sceaux circle—and I knew everyone worth knowing, from the Cardinal

de Polignac to M. de Malezieu; but times had changed—my fortunes had changed, and although Madame la Duchesse du Maine still held a magnificent Court, which in the latter days of Louis Quatorze had curiously contrasted with the dull monotony of the Grand Monarque's own, and gathered about her men of letters, of the drama, and of the sword, my wild gambling spirit and roving temperament alienated me steadily from my old illustrious acquaintances; and at last, weary of tolerating my endless duels and my recklessness at the dice or the lansquenet table, even my lord Cardinal, when we met, passed with a cool nod that made my face flame.

Well, well! What cared I? Friends, such as they are, come and go, and if a dozen saints cut my company, I always found twenty sinners to aid me spend a gay night with the wine and the cards! And, to tell the truth, I was more at home 'mid the sinners than the saints. Perhaps this was why Madame la Duchesse de Berri so fascinated me.

Life to Madame seemed to be a road which should be strewn with roses, and fringed by the admiration of a thousand fond lovers whose hopes were centred wholly on her smiles, and I, to whom she had given caresses and a promise which kept my heart dancing like a ball on a water spray, counted myself the

luckiest man in all France. I was already closer to her and to my reward: I had killed the rascal Silvain, gained a footing in the château, and had even won a graceless word of indulgence from Mademoiselle Aurélie, who, like a hound, appeared to know a rogue by instinct. This was exceedingly gratifying, and I began to cast about in my quick mind how I might further ingratiate myself into her reluctant favour, and use her as a medium 'twixt the Chevalier and myself in my diplomatic strivings to gain possession of those letters relating to the new conspiracy.

Then there was M. le Marquis de Merivale. What was he doing at Cheverny? I would make it my business to find out, and, if possible, get rid of a most inconveniently astute and frivolous Englishman. If it came to the worst I should have to quarrel with him, and send my blade under his ribs. The trick was nothing new to me—and now I was gaily careering down the hill to Hell, a life, more or less, on my soul could scarcely matter. *Ruat cœlum!* and I would try at the last to be a man!

While I pondered, who should approach from one of the *berceaux* but M. le Marquis himself, and, strolling through the gardens, he ascended the steps to the terrace and honoured me by a careless nod.

“A magnificent afternoon, M. le Marquis!” I observed.

"Very," he replied.

"You seem much at home in Cheverny," I said, trying to be rude against my will. He put his hands in his pockets, and surveyed me with a laughing eye.

"You are, I understand, heir to Cheverny," he remarked, leaning against the marble balustrade, "but I cannot compliment the domain on its future owner. Monsieur, you resemble one of my cocks. You crow loudest on other people's dunghills, and until the Chevalier and Mademoiselle tire of my company I shall make myself as much at home here as I please."

I laughed back at him.

"Ah, it is Mademoiselle!" I cried. "She is the lodestar, eh, M. le Marquis?" and I looked to see his face flush, but with a wonderful serenity he cocked his head a little on one side, and hummed a scrap of an opera song, very softly, in a manner that rasped against my temper like a file.

"It is Mademoiselle who keeps you at Cheverny!" I cried again, bent on making his passion burst.

"Are the grapes sour, Monsieur?" he murmured, brushing a clot of snow from his shoe. "You seem to resent my presence here; but I can assure you Mademoiselle's smiles are a hundred times more alluring than your frowns, and as long as the sun-

shine of her eyes warms my heart, I shall feel I am welcome at Cheverny. But you appear to be an unbidden guest. Why is that?"

"Your insolence, M. le Marquis, is getting the better of my temper," I replied, "and unless you wish to measure swords with me, I think you would be wise in bridling your loose tongue."

"Oh!" he laughed. "I believe you want a duel, burn my red blood if I don't!"

"The matter may go as far as M. le Marquis pleases," I said.

"Well, Monsieur Silvain, you certainly amuse me," he answered, "and I have no doubt you are thirsting to hear your rapier rattle 'gainst mine; but it is not my custom, or the custom of any honourable Englishman, to fight with low rufflers who think it no shame to stab defenceless men and women in the dark streets by the Cathedral of Notre Dame. Adieu, Monsieur, adieu! and the Marquis swung **away** into the salon to meet Mademoiselle, leaving me alone on the terrace to gnash my teeth in fury. At the moment I forgot I was not Silvain de Cheverny.

CHAPTER VII

MONSIEUR IS A DEVIL

THE days passed drearily at the château ; I was tolerated by Aurélie and the Marquis, feared by the grooms, hated by the maids, and treated by the Chevalier with a strange mingling of friendliness and subtle contempt. At times I had a strong mind to be Audran de Championnet once more—to throw off the Silvain mask and with art and flattery win my way into Mademoiselle's heart ; but then the fear came across me that I might be discovered, and my little plans nipped in the ripening bud. M. le Marquis and I spoke no more of a duel, and when I had accompanied him to one of the berceaux and won a hundred louis by betting on a new cock which nearly killed Saint Peter in the first encounter, I was almost ready to forgive him for his affront on the terrace.

Mademoiselle too, now and again, deigned to address me, and I had many opportunities of observing her very excellent qualities and admirable

length of character. Although no older than dame la Duchesse, who was scarcely twenty-two, and who had been schooled in the world's gaiety and fascination and sin at Versailles, the Palais-royal, and the Luxembourg, I warrant Aurélie de Mervy was not a whit less accomplished in her knowledge of men and Court folly ; for from the valier she might have learned enough scandal, intrigue, and wickedness to turn a giddier man's head. Yes, M. le Chevalier, like Dubois, knew everything—he frequently received long letters from old Parisian acquaintances who were conversant with all that was happening round the court or at the Court of Sceaux, where the duchesse du Maine still magnetised a splendid following by her magnificent fêtes and delightful parties, and in dull moments, over his wine, he regaled his daughter with reminiscences of his past which were most certainly unfit for any woman's ears.

But Aurélie was a girl of a thousand, and she had her happened days of melancholy when I would have given my sight for such a flood of devotion and love as she poured upon the unworthy old valier. I say I was melancholy, and how I know I save that sometimes 'tis the sinner's scourge, here were great reasons why I should keep a quiet heart during the next few weeks. While my

plot was dormant others were quickening, and I was soon plunged in a veritable whirlpool of extraordinary happenings. M. le Chevalier, who had been downstairs a little, was forced again to retire to his bed, and I was surprised one day when Aurélie came with a message from him.

"My father would like to see you," she said, not over-delightedly, and following her to the chamber, I found the old scoundrel sitting up in his bed. His strange, wicked eyes gleamed as I entered, and, stretching out a slender hand, he bade me welcome. Aurélie immediately retired, and, closing the door, I locked it fast.

"Why is that?" asked the Chevalier, peering across at me and moistening his dry lips with his tongue.

"For precaution's sake, Monsieur," I answered. "You have something extremely important to tell me."

"What makes you think so, Silvain?" he asked.

"Because otherwise you would not have desired my presence here. All the days I have been at Cheverny you and the Marquis and Aurélie have watched and watched me incessantly, and I may as well tell you that I am tired of it. I am your nephew, I am heir to the château and the demesne, I possess the Regent's pardon for a crime done in

hot blood, and there is no reason why I should not be a son to you, M. le Chevalier."

"None whatever," he reflected, "if I could only trust you."

"You might trust me with your life," I said, the words almost burning my throat.

"Will you swear that?" he asked, in a sharp voice, and I answered :

"Monsieur, I will."

"You love M. le Duc d'Orléans, Silvain?" he continued, glancing swiftly at my face.

"No," I replied, "I hate him."

"That is well!" he said, softly; "so do I, Silvain, so do I! But you do not hate him enough to wish him dead?"

"I would kill him with my own hand if the chance came!" I returned, and the Chevalier caught my wrist in an ecstasy of delight and drew my ear down to his lips.

"The chance shall come!" he whispered, panting as though his breath were spent, and picking at the sheets, scarce whiter than his own face, with fingers that twitched and trembled. A sudden silence fell between us, and I could not help smiling to think how the Regent would have laughed had he heard my mock braggadocio.

Mon Dieu, I seemed to be playing my cards with

success, and slowly but surely M. le Chevalier was beginning to succumb to my lying protestations of faith and loyalty. So low had I come ! Yet what could I do ? There was Madame la Duchesse to be won ; and if ever a woman was worth sinning for, it was she.

While the Chevalier lay back amid his pillows in meditation, I stood looking at him and playing with my rings. Among them was the Cheverny signet he had given Silvain, and I daresay this, more than my superb acting, disarmed him of any slight suspicion of my right to use the château as I pleased in a masterful manner peculiarly my own.

The afternoon darkened, and, lighting a candle, I drew the heavy curtains just as M. le Chevalier roused himself from something resembling a lethargic stupor.

“ You are still here, Silvain ? ” he whispered.

“ I am waiting on you, Monsieur,” I replied, and the old subtle sparkle danced to his eyes once more.

“ Ah, we were speaking of His Highness the Regent ! ” he answered, and I watched his white fingers crawl to my wrist with a little shudder of nameless horror.

“ Yes, we were speaking of the Regent,” I said. “ You want me to kill him.”

His lips emitted a low, evil laugh.

"You should be well paid for your work," he murmured.

"Murder deserves a reward," I replied. "What would be yours, Monsieur?"

"You are mercenary, Silvain!" M. le Chevalier cooed. "It was always gold, gold, gold, when you were a boy, and time has not cured your avarice. Do you remember when you stole my purse, eh, you thief?"

"Perfectly," I returned, with a sangfroid that was admirable.

"What did you do with the money?" he asked.

Some men might have been cornered by this, but M. le Vicomte de Championnet was no ordinary adventurer of the bull-headed type. He had brains—he had quickness—he had imagination, and the reply came very swiftly:

"Monsieur, I spent it all among the officers of the Gardes Françaises. Half went at lansquenet, half at dice. It was only five hundred louis!"

"Seven!" he corrected.

"Seven then," I answered. "Well, it does not matter—all was lost at the gaming-tables."

"I imagined that," he said. "Ten years have passed."

"Is it really so long a time?" I mused. "Peste! how a man's life flies. And the devil of it is that

one gets so little gaiety out of it. Now what do you want me to do, Monsieur—kill the Regent by poison, by knife, or by bullet?"

"I want you to kill him in any way you please," he replied, lowering his voice again to a thin, intense whisper. "Silvain, I am deep in a plot with Alberoni for the overthrow of the Regency."

I drew back with affected surprise.

"I have letters here," he continued, glueing his lips to my ear—"letters from my Lord Cardinal, Madame la Duchesse du Maine, and a dozen others, all united in a common hatred against M. le Duc d'Orléans and that pretty wanton, Madame la Duchesse de Berri."

I shook his fingers from my wrist, and Pardieu! it was a hard matter for me to keep my own from his throat. I choked with rage: my face, I know, was grey with passion, and had M. le Chevalier been a younger man I would have almost thrashed him as he lay. But I controlled my temper, and presently, growing calmer, I ventured a strong remonstrance.

"What have you heard of Madame la Duchesse de Berri, Monsieur?" I demanded.

"Much," he said.

"Evil?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied. "What else?"

"But I am her lover!" I cried, the words wrenched from my lips by the cool torture of M. le Chevalier's exasperating manner. The next moment I cursed myself as the greatest fool under God's sun.

"You are only one of them," said the Chevalier. "She has a score."

"It would be no wonder if ten thousand worshipped her," I replied, the sweat running down my face.

"There are a great many idiots in Paris," he returned, "and you appear to be one of them. But as you have only just been released from the Bastille, I cannot quite understand how she has found time to fascinate you."

"I met her at the Luxembourg," I said, sinking deeper into the mire.

"At the Luxembourg? What were you doing there?"

"I was at the Luxembourg by the Regent's invitation."

"Immediately after you left the Bastille?"

I nodded.

"And why?" he asked; and finding me silent, M. le Chevalier drew me closer and hissed again into my ear, "And why?" My lips were sealed; I tried to lie, but the words would not come, and

though I wrenched myself free, De Cheverny made another snatch at my wrist, slid back my sleeve, ran his fingers along my arm, and then thrust me aside with a strange shrill laugh that leapt echoing round the chamber like the snarl of some wild beast.

“Caught!” he screamed. “Caught! You devil! You damned spy! Ha! ha! you would have been clever indeed to fool Antoine de Cheverny, and yet I see how nearly I was fooled. You had the signet, you had Silvain’s face, you had his voice and his insolence, but you have not his loud, harsh laugh, Monsieur, nor his scar on your arm. These trifles escaped you when you decided, no doubt at the instance of the Regent of France, to try and pass yourself for my nephew, and steal some secrets from me. But I have found you out—the whole plot is plain as glaring day, and I know now why you came to Cheverny. Oh-ho! to think the grooms, and the serving-men, and the maids, and Aurélie should be cheated day after day by a rascal whose villainy was only discovered by an old man!” And he began to shout at the top of his voice for Mademoiselle and M. le Marquis de Merivale.

I sprang forward and clapped a hand on his mouth, tripping against a chair as I did so, and knocking over the candle. In an instant, in the wink of an

eye, M. le Chevalier squirmed like an eel from my grasp, and leapt out of the bed. I heard him patter across the room, I heard him searching to and fro, and presently a slight clicking noise made me start, and I knew he had found a pistol. I could not see him, but, scenting danger, I pulled my rapier free and moved cautiously backward. The quick pant of his breath was loud, and I was wondering in what part of the chamber he was standing when the snap of a trigger and a faint flash of flint told me that the weapon had missed fire. A flood of blasphemy poured from M. le Chevalier's lips, and then, still listening, a silvery, tinkling noise struck on my ears, and the pattering of his bare feet recommenced.

"Sang Dieu, he has a sword!" I muttered; and, dropping to my knees, I began to search for the candle, which had rolled underneath the bed. Groping with outstretched hands, I moved along, and suddenly my fingers touched a man's ankle. It was the Chevalier's, and I heard him give a soft, sobbing kind of laugh, very weird and exultant, as he thrust downward with all his ebbing strength. The point of his sword ripped a hole in my coat, and passed over my hip like a tongue of fire, leaving a sharp, burning pain; and stifling a cry, I caught at his foot and tripped him up, so that he fell across the

bed, calling again for Aurélie and the Marquis. His voice rose to a shriek, and I had scarce time to wriggle to the door when Mademoiselle came and drummed upon it with her little hands.

I threw down my rapier and rapidly shot both bolts. Satan himself could not have been more cruel ; and yet I was not cold or heartless, but driven by necessity to keep Aurélie out while I collected my wits. I crept once more to the bed, found the candle, and kindling a flame with trembling fingers, bent over the Chevalier and looked upon his face. It was stamped by the hand of death, and I stepped back, shaken and amazed. The lips were parted, the teeth wore a grin of hate dreadful in its intensity, and the eyes were indescribable. Only a man dying with a soul insatiate for vengeance could look as M. le Chevalier de Cheverny looked at me ; and when I retreated to the door and set my back against it, regardless of Mademoiselle's cries, I wished to heaven I had never lighted the candle. I shuddered to watch him, and yet I could not tear my gaze away from that shrunken, evil face, streaming with the death-sweat ; nor from those eyes—now bright, now dim, but always full of an inextinguishable loathing—which followed my every movement.

And all this time Mademoiselle was screaming

"mon père ! mon père !" and beating the door with her hands until I daresay they bled. One or two maids, attracted by the noise, were approaching, and I thanked God M. le Marquis had gone down to Cheverny on an errand for Aurélie. If the Chevalier would only die quickly ! I caught myself praying that he might, and with good reason, for my plot and my hopes of Madame la Duchesse were doomed if he had breath enough to reveal my perfidy to those at Cheverny. Nay, there was no help for it,—I could do nothing else but keep them out until his last gasp.

Presently he revived a little, and although he lay flat on his back across the bed in the yellow night robe, with his white hair shining like silver, he managed to raise his head and shriek again for Aurélie once, twice, thrice,—and her cries of passion and entreaty were enough to move the pity of the devil or make the angels weep.

"Silvain, are you within ?" she screamed. "Oh, open the door ! open the door ! Mon Dieu, my father is dying ! Give me entrance, Silvain, for Christ's sake ! Oh, you devil ! you devil !"

"Aurélie !"

It was M. le Chevalier's last call. Back dropped his head, and leaving my post I ran forward and peered down into his face.

"Yes! yes!" I murmured; "he is dead. Thank God, he is dead!"

At that very moment his eyes unclosed, his fingers caught at my shoulders in a death-grip which I could neither shake off nor loosen, and dragging me closer and closer until my lips nearly touched his own, he spat a clot of blood in my face! And then something like a ghastly smile crept around his mouth; he shivered once or twice, tried to spit at me again, and died with his stiff fingers plunged in the soft velvet of my sleeves. Tearing myself free from his embrace, I swung about, and, picking up my sword, stood listening in the manner of a wolf at bay.

Men were battering on the door, and amid their rough chorus I could plainly hear the low, bitter sobbing of Mademoiselle Aurélie. Then M. le Marquis de Merivale's voice sounded in the corridor, and she gave a cry, very sudden and loud.

"My father is dead! Silvain has killed him!" she moaned. "Oh, M. le Marquis, M. le Marquis!"

He swore as only Englishmen can swear, and launched his light body against the door with such fury that one bolt burst from the socket, startling me to swift action.

I gazed around. A secrétaire stood in one corner of the chamber, and wrenching open the drawers, I found amid a litter of papers a small packet,

marked "Correspondence with Cardinal Alberoni," and a mad, wicked thrill ran through and through me. Ah! luck was mine, Madame la Duchesse was mine, and now all my dreams of power and passion were on the very brink of realisation. I could go back to M. le Duc d'Orléans, and say: "Monseigneur, I have brought you what you thirsted for," and claim my reward. I could go to the Duchesse, and say: "Madame, I have kept my oath: will you make me the proudest man in France, by redeeming your promise?"—and afterwards would follow fame, greatness, and a life of pleasure.

A life of pleasure! My eyes wandered back to M. le Chevalier, lying so still, and white, and awful, on the bed. What had his life been? That of a roué, a scheming diplomatist, a debauchee steeped in vice and corruption. And yet a woman loved him! A thousand wondering thoughts passed like lightning through my brain, and for an instant I stood irresolute, the letters in my hand; then the door almost burst from its hinges, and, running softly across the chamber, I flung aside the curtains, opened the window, and slipped out upon the ledge, closing the lattice again with extreme gentleness. And the ghost of the Chevalier seemed to be following me all the time, trying to spit clots of blood into my face. At the risk of breaking my limbs I

dropped to the terrace, and escaped with nothing worse than a slight sprain, though my hip, where M. le Chevalier's rapier had torn the flesh, burned like fire, and a momentary stab of agony forced me to lean against the marble balustrade.

A brilliant radiance of silver moonlight flooded the terrace and the trim parterre, and the golden tracery of the little berceaux danced and sparkled in the strong stream of crimson illumination which poured from the windows of the grand salon out into the night. What a mockery it seemed! And above, in M. le Chevalier's chamber, they were kindling candles, and, although it may have been fancy, I could have sworn I heard Mademoiselle Aurélie's voice crying, "Oh, you devil! you devil!"

CHAPTER VIII

M. LE MARQUIS IS FOILED

“COME, my dear de Championnet, en avant!” I said to myself. “There is no time to waste”; and I painfully made for the stables. The courtyard was deserted, and I could imagine the grooms and boys staring into the Chevalier’s room with white, fascinated faces, and Mademoiselle Aurélie swooning in the arms of M. le Marquis.

“A pretty picture,” I muttered. “Well, here’s for Paris and love! Where are the lanthorns?”

I found one just without the entrance to a long building in which M. le Duc’s mare was stalled, and a dozen other horses; and before saddling her, I took a quick glance at the packet in my hand. It was loosely tied by a strip of black silk, and caution urged me to break this with my fingers; and I confess I nearly cursed my heart out to discover that, instead of a priceless bundle of letters written by Cardinal Alberoni, the cover contained nothing but a few thick wrappings of naked parchment, which

had evidently been wound around something of value to protect it from wet, or the wear and tear of travel. For the moment mad disappointment and frantic chagrin made me grind my teeth and stamp until the stable rang: then my old indomitable strength of will re-asserted itself once more, and I swore that naught on earth should conquer my desires, whatever they might be.

Thrusting the packet of rubbish into my pocket, I returned to the terrace and entered the salon. M. le Marquis was there, lounging on a couch, with a face of iron; Mademoiselle also was there, sitting by a table, with her head resting upon her white arms, weeping bitterly; and I stood near the hearth, gazing at each in turn. The Marquis rose, and I thought he had a mind to depart; but instead, he quietly tugged out his rapier and approached me in a cool, relentless fashion that took me entirely by surprise, and I wondered what the plague he intended to do.

"I am going to kill you, Monsieur!" he announced, and Aurélie looked up with red, blazing eyes, and gave a sharp, rapturous laugh which turned me cold.

The raw, deliberate hate in that laugh unutterably astonished me, and I pray God no gentleman of fortune may ever cringe before such a gaze of

loathing as Mademoiselle poured into my eyes. Almost unconscious of my act, I drew my sword, and waited on M. le Marquis like a man in a dream ; but my point was lowered, and he would take no advantage, though I certainly deserved a dog's death.

"On guard, Monsieur de Cheverny !" he said.
"I would let an assassin fight for his life !"

I flung down my rapier, and folded my arms.

"I am not an assassin, M. le Marquis, but a man who has no fear to die," I replied, and he looked at me in some amazement, with his blade on the quiver ; while Mademoiselle Aurélie, both hands pressed to her bosom, rose erect, and stood motionless, extraordinarily pretty and magnificent.

"You will not fight me ?" exclaimed the Marquis.

"Why should I ?" I answered.

"You killed M. le Chevalier !" he cried.

"You lie, Monsieur !" I said.

"No man on earth shall give me the lie !" he replied.

"I have done so," I murmured.

"And shall pay for it."

"When you please," I said. "It is a matter entirely between ourselves. But I repeat that the Chevalier did not die at my hands, M. le Marquis."

"I do not believe you!" cried Aurélie, flashing round upon me like a stream of light. "You bolted the door of his chamber—you forced a quarrel, and you killed him!"

I laughed softly.

"Prove it, Mademoiselle."

"I want no further proof than your natural rascality!" she answered. "What are you but a villain and a murderer? What else have you been these ten years past?"

"I was once a gentleman, Mademoiselle Aurélie!"

"You surprise me," she returned, with a bitterness which caused my anger to flame. How this woman hated me!

"I visited M. le Chevalier, my uncle, at his own request," I said. "You cannot deny that, Mademoiselle."

Her voice was silent, but one little foot beat a rattling tune on the floor.

"And he confided to me a secret," I continued. "If M. le Marquis de Merivale would be so courteous as to leave us alone, I might explain to you, Mademoiselle, all that occurred."

"M. le Marquis shall stay," she replied, with decision.

"Mademoiselle need have no fear of me," I said.

A quick curl of her red lip was my only answer, and, by my soul, it was enough.

"Very well," I resumed, "M. le Chevalier's death must remain a mystery. Come, be just, be reasonable, be strong, and hear me dispassionately, Mademoiselle."

For awhile she hesitated, glancing sometimes at the Marquis, sometimes at me, and I met her eyes with a true, steady gaze which seemed to foil her distrust.

"As you will," she replied, and, slapping his rapier home to the sheath, M. le Marquis quietly moved towards the door. He turned his head once, that was all, but there was a threat in his look which I quite understood, and I favoured him with a serene smile. He bowed, the door closed, and Aurélie waited for me to break the long silence.

She was very calm and pale, and her gown of daffodil silk had a sheen as of gold in the candle-light, and a little stray tangle of hair fell over her left temple, giving her face a piquant and indescribable charm. Her fine eyes shone with great brilliance, and I began to compare them with those of Madame a Duchesse, coming at last to the decision that Mademoiselle's were both sweeter and purer than Madame's, now the devil of passion had flown.

"Well, Monsieur?" she said, and I started, quite perceptibly.

"You will reserve your judgment until the end?" I asked.

"Go on, Monsieur," she replied. "I am waiting to hear how you killed my father."

The tears sprang again to her eyes, and I could not help wondering how strange a thing it was that she should have borne such a love towards M. le Chevalier; but I once heard the Cardinal de Polignac remark with a great deal of gravity that he thought women must have been a perplexity to God ever since the Creation.

"If you wait to hear how I killed your father, you may wait till Judgment Day, Mademoiselle!" I said, "and then you will find that he did not die at my hands."

"At your sword-point, then!" she cried.

"Have you found a scratch on his body?" I returned.

"A pistol and rapier lay upon the floor," she answered.

"And whose were they, Mademoiselle," I demanded,—"whose but M. le Chevalier's? He tried to take my life—yes, you may look scornful, you may grind your pretty teeth, but you cannot get away from the truth. I admit that we quarrelled, though the fault was not mine."

"Why did you quarrel?" she asked.

"M. le Chevalier wanted me to join him in a plot against the Regent—that was why, Mademoiselle," I replied. "He urged me to kill M. le Duc by stealth."

I hoped to see her start, but she stayed cool and calm as a beautiful pillar of snow, with a mocking smile on her lips.

"And you declined?" she returned, in exquisite surprise. "I should have thought another murder would have been honey to Monsieur Silvain de Cheverny!"

"You drive me mad!" I cried. "My God, Mademoiselle, if only you were a man!"

"If I were a man, Monsieur," she said,—“if I were a man, I would take you by the throat and choke you from the château!"

I laughed aloud, full of admiration for her superb spirit, and she began again to stamp her foot upon the floor.

"Come, Mademoiselle, we waste time," I replied. "Permit me to repeat that M. le Chevalier, after I refused to join his plot against M. le Duc d'Orléans, attacked me with a pistol, which missed fire, and then with a sword. See, there is blood on my clothes; and, rather than fight him, I escaped by the window. You may call me a coward if you like; but I had no mind to run my rapier through an old

man, and when I was gone, passion must have stretched him dead. Remember that he was weak and ill."

"Is this all you have to say?" she answered.

"All, Mademoiselle!" I returned. "Is it not sufficient to make me appear cleaner in your eyes?"

"No, Monsieur, it is not enough! Whether your explanation is truth or a lie, God alone will judge. My opinion of you remains the same."

"And you still hate me?" I murmured.

"I have always done that," she replied. "Monsieur, now my father is dead, this château is no place for me, and I shall take the earliest opportunity of leaving Cheverny when the notary has arranged for your occupation and enjoyment of the dwelling and demesne. I would go at once, willingly, under the care of M. le Marquis de Merivale, were it not that he above claims my ministrations."

"Mademoiselle, I beg you will remain at Cheverny!" I cried.

"Remain at Cheverny—with you?" she said, hot scorn in her voice.

"Nay!" I replied. "My business here need only last a few days; and then, Mademoiselle, I promise on my sacred word of honour to leave you unmolested—mistress of Cheverny. Can I say more? Think it over, and give me your answer to-morrow."

This has been your home all your life ; let it continue so. I have no wish to spend an hour a month here. My heart is in Paris ; and if ever I find it necessary to return occasionally to the château, I will be careful, Mademoiselle, to avoid thrusting my unwelcome presence upon you. I shall soon—shall soon—be gone——”

I felt a sudden faintness stealing o’er my body, and then came a great stab of pain ; but I caught at the high mantel and swung back against the wall, fighting the agony. Aurélie stood gazing upon me, floods of wonder pouring from her eyes ; and as I lost my hold and swayed to and fro, I swear that she almost involuntarily took a swift step towards my aid. I staggered once more with a tippy, spinning reel, gave a savage laugh at my powerlessness, and sank slowly down, Mademoiselle bending over me.

CHAPTER IX

THE INCONSISTENCIES OF WOMAN

IT was nigh midnight when my wits returned, and I found myself drowsing in my chamber. A woman was near—I could hear the soft rustle of her gown—and looking up, I beheld Aurélie standing by the lattice. She was dressed in black; and presently, thinking I still slept, she moved across the room on tiptoe, and I saw that a little cluster of winter roses nestled in her white bosom. Heavens! what a superb presence was hers—so full of grace and immeasurable charm!—and what a divine face! A delicate strength shone in every feature, and there was a glow in her eyes which I had never seen before—very sweet and subdued, like a lanthorn shining through the snows.

After busying her lithe fingers awhile among some small phials, she approached the bed, and I immediately pretended to be wrapped in slumber. She lowered her face until I felt her light breath upon my cheek, and for a long time she seemed to

be listening to the beating of my heart. Her head was close to my breast—her russet-gold hair was touching me. It is hard to win a woman's love—easy to gain her sympathy, and as I lay there, passive, I could not help thinking what a scene would occur if Madame la Duchesse de Berri entered. Of a sudden I stirred a little, and opened my eyes, and in an instant Mademoiselle Aurélie drew back as though stung. Two candles burned in the chamber, and, taking one of them in her hand, she held it so that the glow might fall upon my face, and a slight flush, perhaps of fear, crept into her pale cheek as I rose on my arm and looked at her. The great clock of the château struck twelve, and then the silence was intense.

“Mademoiselle,” I said at last,—“Mademoiselle de Cheverny !”

“Yes,” she replied, with very soft distinctness. “What do you want ?”

“To thank you for being an angel,” I murmured.

“I am only a woman,” she answered. “You are better, Monsieur, and I will go and ask M. le Marquis de Merivale to watch by your side until day-break.”

“Nay, nay ; I will not have him here,” I said. “Monsieur has no love for me, and I have none for him. We should quarrel before the night had

passed. Did you intend staying till dawn in my chamber, Mademoiselle,—you, with your grief and your weariness?”

“Yes,” she admitted, and her voice was lower than ever.

“Why?” I asked.

“You have been our guest,” she said, “and I thought that perhaps I might—have—wronged you a little,—I thought, after all, you might have spoken the truth, and that my father did wound you with his sword. And if I hated you, I could not let you die.”

“Die, Mademoiselle!” I exclaimed. “The hurt is nothing. I have lost some hot blood and am weakened, but in a few days I hope to be able to leave you in peace at Cheverny.”

She was silent awhile. Then she said, almost in a whisper:

“I pray God you may.”

Her words tore my heart, and I began to wonder what had come to me. Mademoiselle Aurélie, and not Madame la Duchesse, seemed to hold the power of making me blithe or sad—of creating my Heaven and my Hell; and the longer I gazed at her supple, girlish form, and let my eyes dwell on the pure loveliness of her face, the more her presence entranced me.

It was a witching hour, too, this of the midnight, and lent a subtle glamour to my dreamy reflections on what my life might have been had such a woman as Aurélie crept into it ten long years ago, before the passion for the dice, and the duel, and the gay world laid hold of my soul and dragged it low in the mire.

Well, well ! all of us men have our little fling and pay for it, and there is no sin on earth or sea which can be bought save through a price,—all women, too, must have their little romance, and Madame la Duchesse was scarcely one to take her hand out of the fire, if it gave her pleasure to keep it there. Did she really love me, or were her professions of affection, and her promises, and her caresses, only a part of an intrigue between the Regent, M. l'Abbé Dubois, and herself—a temptation to lure me to the oath I had taken that I might save them all from the possible humiliation of quarters in the Bastille, by wrecking this plot of the Duchesse du Maine, the Cardinal Alberoni, and the Chevalier de Cheverny, which, had it ripened and succeeded, would have most certainly dealt a death-blow to the Regency and the gaities and follies M. le Duc and his daughter were said to love ?

For the first time I began to feel suspicious of the Duchesse, and for the second time I began

to compare her unfavourably with Mademoiselle. These stories of Madame—there might, after all, be some truth in them, and I had been so long an alien that my three days' stay in Paris scarcely gave me an opportunity of gleaning every shred of scandal which buzzed in the air ; and then, Heaven knows, I was never cursed by being born a gossip. But if Madame la Duchesse had played me false ? I shook with rage at the thought, and I think Aurélie imagined me delirious, for she brought a cooling draught, and was surprised to see me take it from her fingers with quite a brave show of my old swift energy.

"You are certainly much better, Monsieur," she said, "and I shall now leave you."

"One moment, Mademoiselle," I urged, stretching out my hand ; "M. le Chevalier, my uncle, possessed some letters from the Cardinal Alberoni and Madame la Duchesse du Maine concerning the intrigue in which he intended to play so prominent a part. They must not be left here."

"And why not ?" she asked, standing by the door with a restless bosom and blazing eyes. "I, too, am implicated, Monsieur : Madame la Duchesse du Maine is my very dear friend, and if anyone is faithful enough to hold the key to so great a conspiracy it is Aurélie de Cheverny. I hate the

Regent, I loathe Madame de Berri, and I have nothing but a curse for M. l'Abbé Dubois! They are ruining France!"

Her foot was playing its old quick tune on the floor, and her pose was magnificent. Sang Dieu! she was a girl of a million.

"You are too passionate, Mademoiselle," I returned—"glorious, but too full of fire; and if you will hearken to me, and trust me, I think I can show you how to deal with the letters."

"I am listening, Monsieur," she said.

"Why not send them to M. le Cardinal?" I continued.

She shook her head.

"No, they are too precious. Madame la Duchesse du Maine has written me more than once with regard to the possibility of my father's death."

"What did Madame advise?" I inquired.

"Why should I tell you?" she asked.

"M. le Chevalier trusted me," I returned, and her eyes softened.

"That in case of emergency they should be sent to the Cardinal," she said, without hesitation.

"Exactly," I replied. "Her suggestion is mine. To whom did she contemplate entrusting the letters?"

"To a gentleman who is now dead," Mademoi-

selle answered. "He was once a friend of hers, but had become a gamester and a soldier of fortune. The other day, however, she heard of his return to Paris from Italy, and wrote me saying she hoped to arrange an interview, and admit him to the conspiracy."

"How did she know he would join?" I asked.

"Heaven knows," she replied. "Madame du Maine can do anything with a man."

"She is certainly a clever little woman," I said. "Well, and what then, Mademoiselle?"

Her tears came again, very fast and bright.

"If anything should happen to my father, this gentleman would hold the threads of the whole intrigue. He was an accomplished duellist, gifted in diplomacy, extremely faithful in friendship and the most dashing adventurer in all France! That was Madame's opinion of him."

"Extraordinarily well summed up," I commented. "And what was his name?"

"M. le Vicomte de Championnet."

"The Vicomte de Championnet?"

I gasped for breath like a dying man, and how in the name of the devil I smothered my astonishment I cannot tell, but give you my word that Mademoiselle suspected nothing—so excellent an actor had I become.

"Then M. le Vicomte is dead?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, Monsieur," she replied, "he is dead. He was killed in a duel near Pontigny by some unknown person, and Madame du Maine has lost a great hope, and one who might have been an incomparable friend to our cause."

"But if de Championnet was so fine a duellist how came he to fall, Mademoiselle?"

"You ask a riddle," she replied. "God may be able to answer it, but none else. He was run through the neck."

"His opponent must have been the neatest rascal with a rapier in Europe, and I should like to meet him."

"You!" she said, and there was such contempt in her voice that the blood raced in my body. This girl was enough to madden the saints!

"Yes, I, Cousin Aurélie!" I answered, in a sibilant tone which roused her to unutterable fury.

"You presume too much, Monsieur; you are intolerably familiar!" she cried.

"I shall be as familiar as I please, Mademoiselle," replied, my temper getting the better of my courtesy. "The de Cheverny blood runs in my veins as well as yours."

"Yes, that is the devil of it all!" she stormed—that you—so low, so base, so savouring of the ca-

naïlle—should bear my name. Oh, how can God let such a scoundrel breathe !”

“I’ll bring you to my feet !” I said, throwing the clothes from my breast, and leaning forward to glare at her.

For a moment she stood rigid—her eyes dilating and flaming—her bosom tossing like the sea ; then stooping a little, she suddenly flung her right hand at my mouth, fetching a tiny stream of blood from my lips. I wrenched my body about in a fit wild rage, but the pain of my wound caught me again and held me powerless, so that I sank back once more and lay still.

The château was very silent, but the wind snored as it drowsed among the trees, and the occasional baying of a hound came like the sound of a deep, sonorous bell through the cold night. The lattice was uncurtained, and I could see the bright stars winking in the clear heavens, and a stray moonbeam crept into the chamber to war with the red candle-glow. Then something seemed to fall, and I glanced up to find Mademoiselle Aurélie lying upon her face on the floor. At first I thought she had fainted, but when the room echoed with her low sobs, I began to wonder afresh at the inconsistencies of woman ; but I durst not break the silence. Nay, even in my passion, I was wise, and stayed as one

and until she slowly arose and came creeping on her knees towards my bed, her little wet handkerchief in her hand. She never spoke; but although I kept my eyes closed to her, I could feel that she was wiping the blood from my lips, and when an instant after the light tapping of her heels, and the opening and shutting of the door, told me she had gone, I found the cluster of winter roses from her warm bosom scattered on my breast.

The night wore through, but I saw her no more, and dawn brought to my side a lady named Madame Rochette, who nursed me well during the succeeding week, and when one day I dressed and tottered out upon the terrace, lo! there was M. le Comte d'Anquital, and I cursed the very sight of him. What could he be doing at Cheverny? M. le Chevalier lay deep in his grave: Aurélie, yielding to the persuasions of M. le Marquis, had accompanied him in a ride to the village, and I was left alone to do the honours of the château.

CHAPTER X

THE CARDINAL'S LETTERS

M. LE COMTE surveyed me with an extremely subtle smile, and, crossing his feet, lounged against the balustrade—a lithe, fair man, very fascinating among women, but the wickedest rascal on God's earth; and his manner was so jauntily insolent that I knew in a moment he bore a commission from Dubois or the Regent. I am naturally as shrewd as the devil, and suspicion leapt into my heart like a weasel into a pheasant's nest.

“Good-morning, Monsieur!” I cried, recovering a little of my old swash-buckling swagger,—a swagger that I generally assumed while dealing with men like d'Anquital. “To whom am I indebted for the honour of this visit?”

He began to laugh and beat a merry tune on his boot with his riding-switch.

“I am the Comte d'Anquital, at your service, Monsieur!” he cried. “Am I addressing M. de Cheverny?”

"M. Silvain de Cheverny!" I corrected. "My uncle, M. le Chevalier, was buried four days ago."

"And you are in possession of Cheverny?"

"Exactly!" I returned, damning his inquisitive impudence. A quick fear silenced further words. D'Anquital might have recognised me: but no, my disguise was too perfect.

"I am come here at the instance of Monseigneur the Regent of France, to prepare you for a little surprise," chimed M. le Comte.

"Indeed!" I said. "Enlighten me, Monsieur?"

"Monseigneur is about to pay a visit to Cheverny," he replied, and as I live, I saw the rogue's face flame into a blazing smile of unutterable satisfaction when my eyes widened, though I swear I never so much as shifted a muscle or ruffled an eyebrow.

"I shall be more than honoured, Monsieur. Does he travel alone?"

"M l'Abbé Dubois will accompany him!"

"Oh!" I remarked.

"And Madame la Duchesse de Berri."

"Ah!" I cooed, with a tightness over my heart.

"Yes, they are all coming incognito."

"'Tis remarkably kind of them," I replied. "A glass of Rousillon, Monsieur, or a cup of Burgundy?"

Your long ride must have tired you. Where is your horse? At the stables? That is well, and I am glad you are making yourself at home. Is your stay likely to be long?"

"As long as M. le Duc pleases," he said; and I took a short, limping strut along the terrace, thinking hard.

"You are lame, Monsieur," exclaimed d'Anquital.

"A kick of my horse," I returned.

"The world is productive of hard kicks," he commented, smiling again. "We must get used to them, M. de Cheverny."

"Yes, and to fortune's sword-thrusts," I murmured. "One can never tell when the next may come. To be a philosopher, Monsieur—that is the thing! Ah, here is Mademoiselle Aurélie—my cousin, M. le Comte."

He swept around, and watching him well, I saw an amorous light dance to his eyes at the first sight of her, and I swear she looked glorious enough to turn any man's head. She wore her white and silver riding-dress, and a little red hat was cocked daintily on her short, tossing locks, 'mid which the winter sun sought for threads of gold and found them plentiful: her cheeks were crimsoned by the keen north wind, and there was something in her eyes that tugged at my soul until all that was best

and purest in me fought 'gainst the vows I had made to Madame la Duchesse de Berri.

"Sang bleu! and who is her companion?" asked Anquital.

"M. le Marquis de Merivale," I replied.

"The Englishman! What does he do here?"

"Are you acquainted with him, Monsieur?"

"To my cost!" he said, in a snarl. "M. le Marquis won a thousand gold louis from me in Paris two months ago."

"How, Monsieur?"

"Cocks," he replied; and I laughed softly.

"You have now your chance of revenge," I said. "M. le Marquis is always ready to lay a wager, and believe he is a very fine swordsman."

"The best in all Europe," returned d'Anquital.

"One has only to look at him to see that he can race," I reflected. "But here he comes. Permit me to present him again to you, M. le Comte."

"He will remember me," said d'Anquital; and at that moment Aurélie dismounted and came upon the terrace, leaving the Marquis to call for the rooms. I faced her with my usual sangfroid, and though Mademoiselle's bright eyes met mine very brightly, I did not flinch from her clear gaze.

"You are recovered, Monsieur," she remarked, and I am glad to find you so well able to walk."

Her words were like balm poured into a raw wound, and I could have blessed her for them.

"Mademoiselle is more than kind," I said. And I give you my oath I felt the hot tears leap to my eyes. She saw them. Her face flushed like a swift glow of warm sunset over a snowy cloud, and she turned her pretty head aside to steal a glance at d'Anquital, who stood smiling and ogling her in the fashion of the insufferable Paris beau. *Sacré!* I felt it hard to keep my fingers from his throat; and when the rascal made a swinging bow, clapped his hand to his breast, and presented himself as "M. le Comte d'Anquital, honoured by the friendship of M. le Duc d'Orléans, by whom he was sent to Cheverny," Mademoiselle's face was something to see.

"And what does M. le Comte desire?" she asked.

"Naught but the constant sunshine of your smiles, Mademoiselle."

"Alas! there is no sunshine at Cheverny," she replied. "Monsieur, am I right in imagining you have brought me a message from Paris?"

"Mademoiselle," said d'Anquital, "I am here by command of Monseigneur the Regent of France."

"And why?" she cried. "To request my presence at the Palais-Royal?"

M. le Comte leered.

"Not yet, Mademoiselle."

"To spy upon me, then! You have a tell-tale face, Monsieur; and, to be perfectly frank, you do not seem to be here on the errand of a gentleman."

M. le Comte breathed a curse, and Mademoiselle surpassed herself with a delightful little laugh of disdain and a tigerish swing of her body which brought her back to the view of d'Anquital, and his face was a picture that hangs in my memory to this day. I knew the fellow was a scoundrel, but I freely confess that I was startled to see how he showed his teeth at Mademoiselle's contempt.

"Here," I said to myself, "is a villain who will need a close watch," and I could feel my strength flooding back to my limbs, while I thirstily regarded him with a sharp desire to face his rapier in a last bout sometime at night, in a place of romance where I might leave him picturesquely stretched upon his back—the glare of a white moon strong on his rigid body and wide-thrown arms. It was a strange imagining: this dream of the killing of a man; but there was a wicked smile round M. le Comte's mouth that roused all the passion in my nature and made my heart cry out for his blood.

"It seems Mademoiselle de Cheverny is still mistress of the château!" purred d'Anquital, after a long pause. "And yet a few minutes ago Monsieur Silvain confessed himself its master."

"Take your commands from Mademoiselle, M. le Comte," I replied. "Her will is mine."

"Indeed!" he exclaimed, with a swift elevation of his eyebrows. "May I present my most delicate congratulations to you both? A charming choice, Monsieur: Mademoiselle, an excellent alliance! When is the wedding to be?"

She gave a low cry; and if looks could kill, the flash of her eyes would have laid M. le Comte at her feet when she swept around and lashed him with her inimitable scorn.

"Mon Dieu!" she cried. "What rats exist, calling themselves men! And it seems the coarsest come from the gutters of the Palais-Royal. Monsieur mon cousin, take this gentleman and throw him from the terrace, or, still better, let the dogs chase him out of your sight!"

I was amazed—stunned—petrified, and yet my heart leapt with a thousand palpitations of unspeakable joy. Mademoiselle had deigned to call me cousin, she had claimed my aid in ridding her of M. le Comte, and she had acknowledged me as master of Cheverny. She had claimed my aid, I say, and yet I could not aid her, as I longed to do, by flinging d'Anquital down among the thorns and the winter roses of the château parterre. No, that would not have been wise: it would not have been diplo-

macy, and for my own sake and for Aurélie's peace I refrained from drawing sword on M. le Comte, or laying hands upon him. And it may be, had I done so, he would have had the better of it, I being still fitter for the bed-chamber than the duel.

"Chase him out of my sight!" cried Mademoiselle, pointing her little gloved hand at d'Anquital.

"Mademoiselle," I returned, "for the moment let him live, and I promise you, when the time comes, the rat shall return to the Palais-Royal drains."

"Coward!" she hissed, and swept into the salon, whither I followed her, leaving M. le Comte to his reflections.

"Coward!" she cried again, and closing the doors, I locked them fast, and, limping towards her, proceeded to tame her Amazonian spirit by the assumption of a masterful manner that seemed to take away her breath, leaving her to stare at me in utter astonishment—her eyes big and shining, and some of her pretty teeth glistening 'twixt the crimson of her lips, for all the world like tiny lily-bells peeping through the beauty of a damask rose.

"Mon Grand Dieu, Mademoiselle!" I said, "you will drive me to extremities, and I'll have to lay my riding-whip 'cross your soft flesh, if you persist in being such a wilful little fool! Yes, you stare, you

stamp, you burn, but I am forced to forget that you are châtelaine here, and to treat you as a father might treat an incorrigible child. Could you not see that this d'Anquital held power in his hands: do you not recognise that the scoundrel is in the pay of Monseigneur the Regent of France, and that he has come to spy out the land? M. le Duc d'Orléans has discovered that M. le Chevalier was waist-deep in an intrigue to upset the Regency, and has sent this fellow, at the first intimation of your father's death, to secure any papers which may be secreted here. As soon as they are found the château will be invaded, probably by M. le Duc and the villain Dubois; and Madame la Duchesse du Maine, your very dear friend, will find herself in a devil of a hole—possibly in the Bastille, or later on the scaffold, while Alberoni, the fox, will be laughed at by all the world; and the incomparable plot that M. le Chevalier and his co-conspirators took such infinite pains to nurse and to foster will be blown like a bubble on the winds of the ridicule of Europe. Mark my words well, Mademoiselle—think them over, and be wise in time.”

She was breathless, and so was I; but, by Heaven, I had fooled her into something like a childish belief and confidence, not only in my loyalty to the Chevalier's intrigue and my excellent diplomacy, but

also into a silent confession that she knew at last I had no other desire than to befriend her through fair weather and foul.

"When the fitting day or night comes, I will kill this d'Anquital!" I continued: "but for the present, Mademoiselle, you must allow him to remain at Cheverny, even as I, an unbidden guest—you must bear with his insults, you must suffer his insolence, and trust to me for the payment of all. And more than that, you must give me your entire confidence, and if I am to save you and Madame du Maine, and to counterplot against this Comte d'Anquital, so that his spying here may end in failure and shame—why, Mademoiselle, we must, at the least, be good comrades-in-arms, if not good friends."

There came a sudden silence, and then Aurélie, in the most charming manner imaginable, stretched out her hands with a sweetness that took my vile heart by storm.

"And why not good friends?" she cried. "Silvain, I have wronged you, I have thought you false when you were true, and that story of your killing a man and a woman under the shadow of Notre Dame was a lie!"

"No," I said, "it was not a lie, Mademoiselle."

"Then you had great provocation—you were never low, and cruel, and base—you were never a

scoundrel and a murderer as once I thought you were. Christ and His Mother pity and forgive me."

"And Christ and His Mother pity and forgive me," I murmured.

"For what?" she flashed out.

"For my sins, Mademoiselle! Think of me again as the Silvain you knew in your childhood. I have been low: I have been base, I have been a scoundrel, and you have only to remember my doings at Cheverny ten years ago to once more bring back your hate of me."

She shuddered, and tightened the grip of her little strong fingers on my hands.

"But you are different now," she whispered. "I cannot tell how, but you seem more of the gentleman than the Silvain of my old memories, and there's a strength in your face that wins one's admiration—even against all hatred, all fear, and all contempt,—and I should not be a true woman if I liked not a good strong man."

Was there ever such a sublime submission? Mademoiselle, in an exquisite surrender, had sacrificed herself once and forever on the altar of a contrition to which I never dreamed she would kneel: she had offered the incense of sorrow and humility for a scorn which I deserved a million times over; and I,

the liar, the hypocrite, the traitor, was playing her false as I had done so many times before with a smiling face and a heart of gall. To win her confidence—that had been my aim from the day I first set foot within the château, and Sang Dieu! at last I had brought her to her knees, and there was some hope of my mission being accomplished before the arrival of M. le Duc d'Orléans and Madame la Duchesse de Berri. Yet, even at that moment of joyless triumph, I little imagined how completely Aurélie was throwing herself upon my faith, my honour, and my friendship.

“Silvain!” she whispered, standing on tiptoe to breathe the words into my ear: “you are my only hope; you must take my father’s place—you must hold the Cardinal’s and Madame du Maine’s letters. Come with me, I will give them to you—come now.”

“Mademoiselle!” I said, and my voice was like the hoarse croak of a raven,—“Mademoiselle Aurélie, I must think awhile! Let me think—for God’s sake let me think!”

Great Heaven, how this girl’s trust stabbed and tore at my heart! I shivered as I stood by her side, feeling her warm breath on my cheek—her hand in mine—her touch thrilling me through and through. The game was won! Fortune and power

lay before me. Madame was mine, and claim her when I pleased if only I would hide Mademoiselle to some secret cupboard or safe and take from her hands that priceless but dangerous conspiracy. The battle was long, and at last I turned my face once more towards Aurélie. Her cheeks have been fierce and white enough to frighten me.

"Mademoiselle," I said, in a voice no louder than a whisper, "I have thought the matter well over, and the letters will be safer in my hands than in yours. Show me where they are hidden."

Her eyes lighted up with a wonderful brightness.

"You make me glad!" she cried. "If I have given you the secret, I shall feel I have done something to atone for my bitterness to you and for my shameful words,—and it may be you will be able to forgive me. Come, Silvain!"

"Lead the way, Mademoiselle," I replied. "I will follow."

CHAPTER XI

THE COMING OF MADAME LA DUCHESSE

It was three days later, and drawing nigh to midnight, when Monseigneur the Regent, Madame Berri, and M. l'Abbé Dubois arrived at the chateau.

It happened to be playing lansquenet with M. le Comte and the Marquis de Merivale, judging it good policy to make myself perfectly amicable with both, seeing that one was my guest by necessity, and the other had extended his invitation at the invitation of Mademoiselle Aurélie. My company was made complete by the presence of an old friend of M. le Chevalier's named Maury de Saint-Cloud, who had called to pay his consolations to Aurélie; and when I pressed on to make a night of it, he generously responded. I had all, I think, been drinking deeply—I to drown the wasp of remorse that had never ceased stinging me from the moment I accepted the letters from Mademoiselle's hands, and the others drank for

devilry, like true gentlemen of France—when the ripping sound of wheels tearing over gravel forced me to move to the lattice, and I caught a glimpse of M. le Duc's coach sweeping round to the right of the terrace.

“Mille Diabes !” I muttered. “Another hour and I shall know my fate. M. le Comte”—and now my voice was clear and sharp as a pistol-shot,—“M. le Duc d'Orléans has come !”

The cards fell from his fingers, and he glanced up at me with a swift gleam of his teeth.

“Allons, Monsieur !” he said ; and we swung together out of the room, leaving M. Maury de Saint-Cloud and M. le Marquis to stare at each other in amazement.

Racing hard down the broad stair, I bade a lacquey throw open the doors of the great portico and kindle the hundred lights of the magnificent salon. I was informed that Mademoiselle, in company with Madame Rochette, had retired for the night, and I give you my word I was not sorry to hear it ; and when my illustrious guests alighted I was waiting to meet them with an admirable assumption of the utmost charm and gaiety of demeanour. Behind me stood M. le Comte d'Anquital ; but did I care a straw for that ? Nay ; by the blood of my heart, I received Madame la Duchesse de Berri as a king

might welcome his betrothed—there was no cringing, no sign of weakness, no crawling to her feet for the sake of a caressing glance—and although I have played the actor in many strange tragedies, never in my life did I hold myself higher than on this eventful invasion of the Château de Cheverny. I was dressed in white satin, and my vest, if I recollect aright, was sprinkled with tracings of roses in crimson and gold; so that I have no doubt my appearance was such as to attract the approval of Madame, and her eyes danced as they lighted upon me.

“So, you see, we are come at last, M. de Cheverny!” she said, and there was a subtle ripple of delicate mockery in her voice which I completely understood.

“I and my château lie at Madame’s entire disposal,” I replied, and offered my arm, making at the same moment my bow to the Regent, by whom it was returned with much elegance. Of M. l’Abbé took no notice whatever, but led the Duchesse straight into the grand salon, and deftly whipped off her furs. She smiled upon me incessantly: we were alone—the intoxication of her presence might have damned a seraph, and while M. le Duc, Dubois, and the Comte d’Anquital whispered together in the corridor, I might have caught Madame swiftly to

my breast ; but no, I stayed calm, and watched the passion flood into her magnificent eyes.

" Mon Dieu, Audran, how cold you are ! " she said.

" It is a cold night, Duchesse," I returned.

" I had a thought you would at least warm my lips," she whispered, and I made no answer.

" Monsieur is very silent," she reflected, with a cutting smile. " Has he found another love ? "

" One woman, Madame, is enough for any man," I said.

" Then you have not forgotten me ? "

" No one who had once seen the Duchesse de Berri could forget her."

She laughed lightly.

" You are a strange rogue, M. le Vicomte ! "

" Hush, Madame," I said, closing the door. " You speak too loud, and my name is now Silvain de Cheverny."

" Ah, I remember," she returned. " But I should have known you anywhere, Audran, in spite of your disguise."

" Hush ! " I implored,

" M. le Duc and the Abbé are gone up the stair, and M. le Comte is following them," she said, opening the door and glancing out. " You need not fear they will interrupt us."

" Walls listen," I replied ; and then, with a sharp

ness that made her start: "What is d'Anquital doing here?"

"How should I know?" Madame answered; "M. le Duc sent him."

"Then I will go farther, and inquire why M. le Duc has come, and the arch-devil Dubois, and you, Duchesse? Has M. le Comte been supplying you with an account of my daily routine at Cheverny? Has he written the Regent to say I am a sluggard in pursuing my quest? Ah, Madame, I see by your face that my words burn you! Could you not trust me awhile? Could you not feel secure in your belief in me?"

She turned away her head, and when I had again closed the door she flashed round upon me in a hurricane of fury.

"Have you the letters, Vicomte?" she cried.

I kept a stubborn silence. She flung back her head, and I do not think I ever saw any woman so haughty, when she pleased, as Madame la Duchesse de Berri.

"Speak!" she stormed.

"If they were in my possession—if I laid them now in your hands, would you come to me and be my wife, Madame?"

"So you think you can claim me when your roguery is done," she replied.

"That was the arrangement," I said.

"But if I refuse? If I change my mind and decide that I do not love you sufficiently to be your wife—what then, Monsieur?"

"That would be the very devil," I replied.

"Would you dare to hold the letters?" she cried.

"Against all France, Madame, if I had them."

"You are a bold rascal."

"As always," I acquiesced. "Lower your voice, Duchesse."

"You have killed Silvain de Cheverny—you have, I daresay, poisoned the Chevalier, and now I hear you are making love to Mademoiselle his daughter. If this is true, Monsieur, you shall rot and rot in the Bastille all your life!"

There was yellow jealousy in her voice, and I could not help smiling, as her glance ran from my face to my feet, and then up again, as though I were something to be spat upon. I stayed silent: no man, except he be a fool, wastes good breath on an angry woman, and I knew enough of Madame de Berri to refrain from whetting her temper on the grindstone of a wordy passage of arms.

"Where is Mademoiselle?" she cried, after a stream of fury had left me with my ears tingling, and at last I answered her.

"In bed, Madame, for all I know. And a very good place too."

"Insolent!" she exclaimed. "I will not leave you until you have confessed to me that your whole life is for Mademoiselle de Cheverny. You have not searched for the letters—but you know where they are; they are in the hands of this girl, and you intend to shield her—you mean to try and crawl away in the dark from your promise to me, but you shall not do so, M. le Vicomte. I will call M. le Duc: I will tell him of your perfidy—you have deceived me, played me false, and by all the saints you shall pay for it, Monsieur!" And with a low sobbing cry, she raced towards the door.

One bound and I had caught the skirt of her floating dress, and it ripped with the sound of a rapier ringing fast from a tight scabbard, but next breath she had her round the waist and swung her back into the centre of the salon.

"You hurt me!" she hissed. "You villain! You hurt me! You make my hands bleed. Let me go! Devil!" and then, swift as a dog might snap at a bone, the Duchesse bent her face, and I felt her sharp teeth close upon my wrist. A spurt of blood stained the long ruffles of Malines lace that crept my fingers, but tightening rather than relaxing my grip, I held Madame fast in my arms.

"Heaven seems to take sport in making me a tamer of women," I murmured. "Duchesse, there was a night when I swore to carry through the mission of M. le Duc d'Orléans, and for your sake I kept my oath."

"Ciel!" she gasped. "You have the letters!"

"Are you ready to become Madame la Vicomtesse de Championnet?" I said.

"You have the letters!" she cried again. "Give them to me! Peste! Audran, how slow you are! Give them to me now, before anyone comes into the salon, and then I . . . I . . ."

"Yes, Madame, what will you do?"

"I will take your name; I will wed you, Monsieur, and in a week you may call me your wife—you may take me back to Paris, and I will marry you. I swear it on my knees!"

She dropped at my feet, and commenced to kiss her little jewelled crucifix with a fervour that made me smile.

"So you are prepared to be true to your word!" I said.

"Yes, a thousand times yes, M. le Vicomte," she whispered, still clinging to my knees. "Make haste! The letters, for the sake of Heaven! You have them in your breast?"

I shook my head. Madame gave a shrill cry and

then knelt still as a statue, listening. Ah, her quick ears had heard what mine had not, the sound of a small door opening into one of the oriels of the salon, and even as the Duchesse leapt to her feet a heavy curtain was swung aside, and before us stood Mademoiselle Aurélie, sublimely drest in a soft black frock laced here and there with silver, and brightened at the bosom by a cream and a damask rose. I breathed either a curse or a prayer, and making my most perfect bow, presented the ladies to one another in a manner of inimitable delicacy.

No man in France could have done it better.

"Madame," I said, "this is my very dear cousin, Mademoiselle Aurélie de Cheverny, of whom we were speaking, and I am overjoyed to find she has not retired for the night, as I so foolishly imagined. Aurélie, Madame la Duchesse de Berri has deserted the Luxembourg and the Palais-Royal, and come all the way from Paris to submit to us her sympathies on the death of M. le Chevalier. Charming of her, is it not? And she is accompanied by Monseigneur the Regent of France and M. l'Abbé Dubois—a deliciously piquant surprise of which I never dreamed."

The Duchesse laughed a light laugh of very pointed mockery.

"M. de Cheverny is eloquent to-night," she said. "Where is Monseigneur my father?"

"With M. le Comte d'Anquital and M. l'Abbé, Madame," I replied.

"Take me to him," she commanded, and surveying Aurélie with an insolent stare, the Duchesse emitted another devilish ripple of laughter, and laid one of her hands in mine.

"Come," she said, and swallowing a red-hot blasphemy, I swung in her company out of the salon, leaving Mademoiselle standing motionless somewhere near the oriel—the picture of magnificent and courageous beauty. I closed the door, and just then who should appear but d'Anquital, and Madame's eyes no sooner lighted upon him than she loosed her hold of my hand.

"Ah, here is M. le Comte!" she cried. "You may leave me now, M. de Cheverny! You may, if you like, return to your very dear cousin, Mademoiselle Aurélie, and to-morrow we shall meet again. Good-night, Monsieur, and pleasant dreams."

D'Anquital's smile made me itch for his blood, but I was scarcely the fool to show chagrin, however bitter the insult. No; I bowed, that was all, and watched them go together up the broad stair, Madame's fingers resting on the arm of M. le Comte, her head inclined towards his, and their faces perilously near each other.

Well, that was her way of torturing me, and when a woman deliberately tries to rouse the jealousy of a man, she is very much in love with him or an incorrigible coquette.

Madame maddened me, and racked by a hundred imaginings, I descended to the terrace, and tramped on and fro 'mid the cold breath of night. Fury kept my body warm as well as my heart, and I stayed here until a sudden gush of rain and wind forced me to take shelter within the château, and I turned my feet once more to the salon, wondering how I should be received by Mademoiselle Aurélie.

The Regent was coming up the stair, and, having no desire to meet him in my present mood, I shrank back into shadow and watched him pass onward towards the chamber to which d'Anquital had escorted the Duchesse. He was probably fresh from an interview with Aurélie, and full of many thoughts, was about to enter the salon by the small oriel—indeed my hand was already on the door—when the sound of Mademoiselle's voice came to my ears extremely clear and resolute, and then, in reply, a man made answer, and some subtle instinct warned me that she was alone with M. le Comte d'Anquital. Alone with d'Anquital, and at night! My heart grew so cold that I shivered, and, pushing the door softly back, I slipped within, shut it again, and,

shrouded by the hangings, crouched low, and fixed my eyes on Aurélie.

Many of the lights had been extinguished, and the only remaining aureola shone around Mademoiselle as she stood by a couch and faced M. le Comte. Both hands flung negligently behind her, and her figure coming out extraordinarily pretty and slender against the rose-coloured stream of light that bathed her face and body in soft radiance. I never saw her look more beautiful, more exquisitely determined, and I knew at a glance that she was at war for the second time with the man I hated most in all the world.

CHAPTER XII

MADemoisELLE AURÉLIE AT BAY

"M. LE COMTE," said Aurélie, "I think it would be well if you followed M. le Duc to the card-chamber. And Madame la Duchesse, an hour ago, leaned 'gainst your shoulder so lovingly that I swear she awaits your return with restlessness. Go to her at once, Monsieur, or you will get your ears pulled!"

"Mademoiselle!" exclaimed d'Anquital.

"You seemed surprised at my audacity!" she replied; "but the only way to shame an insolent man, M. le Comte, is to laugh at him. And I am laughing at you. Come, are you in love with the Duchesse, or does Madame do the wooing?"

D'Anquital's strange eyes began to shine yellow and cat-like from where he stood in the deep gloom, and Dieu! how I loathed him! He wore a coat of green velvet, trimmed and fretted here and there with gold, and the great diamond buckles of his shoes shot out dazzling rays of light as he made a quick shuffle a little nearer to Aurélie. I have already

said he was the wickedest rascal on God's earth, and when his soft, languorous glance crept from Mademoiselle's feet to her face, and clung there, I was mad enough to be ready to stab him in the back and bring my heel down upon his dead lips! Aurélie did not seem to fear him—there lay her danger, and I thanked Heaven a thousand times that I was near, and wore a sword.

"M. le Duc d'Orléans has been tempting Mademoiselle to go with him to Paris—to taste life at the Palais-Royal, and to dazzle the Court with her incomparable loveliness"—M. le Comte began, ignoring her taunt of Madame la Duchesse.

"Yes," she admitted. "You heard my answer, Monsieur."

"It saddened me," he replied, in his silkiest tones. "You were never born to be a nun, Mademoiselle."

And he looked at her with a meaning she could not possibly misunderstand.

"Or you to be a gentleman, Monsieur!" came the ready answer. "I cannot understand your presence here, nor the invasion of Cheverny by M. le Duc, his daughter, and M. l'Abbé. You have come and taken possession of the château as though it were your own."

"On M. Silvain's invitation," replied d'Anquital; and Mademoiselle bit her lips.

"He may have reasons for tolerating you awhile," she reflected, drawing imaginary patterns with her little foot upon the floor.

M. le Comte hissed a laugh.

"M. Silvain de Cheverny is certainly worth your watching," he said. "He is not a man to be trusted, Mademoiselle."

"Tell him so to his face, Monsieur!" she flashed out, "and I give you my word he will make you smart!"

"He is capable of any rascality under the sun," returned d'Anquital.

"And you, Monsieur?"

I could have run forward and kissed her feet for thus championing me in the face of this low unutterable scoundrel, and M. le Comte scarcely seemed to know whether to laugh, to be enraged, or to play the suave diplomatist. He chose the latter rôle, and I must admit the man was a very finished and fascinating persuader. Women had long been his prey—he had studied their vanities, their idiosyncrasies, their weakness, and their strength; he knew when to strike and how to flatter, and the soft notes of his voice fell on one's ears with a charm that might overcome the heart against the will. I have always detested a tongue which runs loose in the oil of flattery, and yet I felt a subtle envy towards the intense al-

lurement of M. le Comte's dashing declaration of love, when all suddenly, and with the most abandoned fervour, he flung himself down before Aurélie and catching at the hem of her frock, pressed it to his lips in the interlude of a red-hot, passionate appeal, and, although his voice was as low as a whisper, my ears did not so much as miss one word.

"Mon Dieu! Mademoiselle, you make me burn to take you in my arms; you are the only woman in France worth worshipping, and I swear on my honour that I love you beyond all dreams—beyond life and death, and beyond my soul's salvation! Is not that enough? I said you were never meant to be a nun—you were born for warm love: you have lived in the cold long enough. Nay, do not try to draw away from me; I have your hands at last, and until your lips have touched mine—until you have lain in my arms and warmed my face with your kisses—I shall not let you go. I have sworn to win you to-night, and by Heaven I will! Some women may be coaxed by subtlety—others wooed by waiting, but you are one of those whose hearts can only be taken by storm. Mademoiselle, come to me!"

I crouched lower, panting. Aurélie was breathing fast, one hand thrown across her bosom; and the purest snow could not have been whiter than her face—the purest jewel could not have beat the cold

brilliance of her eyes, and their look of loathing as she gazed down upon d'Anquital told him better than a torrent of words how indescribable and implacable was her hate.

What a vile scoundrel you are, Monsieur!" she said at last, and the scorn in her voice stabbed M. le Comte to the quick. She flung herself clear of him, but he arose and tried to snatch her wrist. Mademoiselle slid behind the couch.

"Ah, you love this cousin—this Silvain," he snarled, "but do you know what he is? If I told you all, you would rather poison him than smile upon him. A treacherous hound, who is playing you false, who has been worming himself into your confidence that he might work some hellish purpose of his own—that is part of the truth regarding Monsieur Silvain. The rest you will know when it is too late, when you and your friends are betrayed, or loomed to the Bastille or the scaffold. Some day you will think of my warning, and you will understand that I came into your salon to save you as well as to win your love."

"To save me from what?" demanded Mademoiselle.

"Come to me and I will tell you," he returned, and stretched out his arms across the lounge.

Aurélié shrank away from him, there was fear in

her eyes at last : the strong heart yearned for the stronger hand, and realising that she was alone and in his power, her woman's wit turned her into the path of subtlety, which is the woman's sword when all else fails.

"It is late, Monsieur, and I am tired," she said. "Perhaps in the morning we may meet again, and then——"

"Yes, Mademoiselle, and then——?"

"I shall have an answer ready for you."

"No, I must have it now," urged d'Anquital. "What more fitting hour than this, Mademoiselle? We are alone in the silence of night, the lacqueys are in attendance at the card chamber above, and no one will come to interrupt our love. See, I will lock this door . . ."

"No! no! no!" she cried. "Monsieur, I shall call for aid!"

He deliberately crossed the salon, locked the door, and was turning again towards Aurélie, when she made a swift dash for the smaller exit, where I lay hidden 'neath the hangings: but M. le Comte was even quicker, and to avoid his embrace she was forced to swing back once more to her old stand behind the lounge.

"Monsieur!" she exclaimed, quivering with passion and hatred, "you are something too foul for a

pure woman even to spit upon! Had I a whip! My God! had I a whip!"

He folded his arms and leered at her.

"What then, Mademoiselle?"

"I would lay it 'cross your face—I would lash 'ou blind!" she cried, in the white-heat of her fury.

D'Anquital laughed.

"I love you the more for your adorable spirit, which before dawn I'll tame!" he answered. "Cry or help—none will come to you: M. le Marquis and M. de Cheverny are basking in the warmth of Madame de Berri's soft smiles, and while the glamour of her presence is around their hearts they'll cast no thought to you. Will you yield yourself to me, or must I make you captive? You won't! Then . . ."

I rose to my feet. The time had come when I and my sword were needed—already I had waited too long, and M. le Comte was stealing around the lounge, his devilishly handsome face coloured by the rose-rays of the shaded lights.

Mademoiselle slid back step by step, her eyes fixed on his, and there was no longer fear in her gaze,—there was something a thousand times more tartling—the mad daring that turns a brave woman at bay into the tigress; and just as I was about to

step from my hiding-place to send my bright strip of steel through d'Anquital's heart, Aurélie's slim, pretty form bent like a willow—out shot her little hand, and she whipped the rapier as quick as light from its sheath at M. le Comte's side. He muttered a blasphemy—stepped back, leapt on a table, and in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, extinguished the three great candles, and the salon was in darkness. Aurélie gave a low cry, M. le Comte answered it with a laugh, and I heard the quick patter of their feet as he chased her to and fro, avoiding the wild thrusts which I knew she was driving at him at every turn. Then I heard the rapier tinkle loudly on the floor and guessed he had either struck it from her hand, or else she had dropped it, while I, cursing myself for holding back my aid so long, slipped out into the centre of the room and stealthily dogged the heavier footsteps of d'Anquital, my sword poised for a savage, rapid thrust. I could hear the drumming of my heart while Mademoiselle and M. le Comte, both panting, moved about in the dark, Aurélie searching for the oriel door, d'Anquital hot on her trail to frustrate her only chance of escape. Suddenly there came the sound of a laugh, a sob, a scuffle, and afterwards a scream more of fury than dread, and I knew in an instant that he had caught her!

Letting my rapier dangle from my wrist by its silken sword-loop, I stretched forth my hands, ran forward, and, guided by Heaven and the Saints, felt my fingers close and sink into M. le Comte's throat. Choking, the scoundrel kept his grip on Mademoiselle's arm until I swung him furiously away and dragged him like a dead dog towards the hearth. A few embers remained, and still retaining my grasp on M. le Comte, I thrust my blade into the faint red glow, and leaning down, blew upon the cinders until a tiny flame flickered upward, showing me the evil visage of d'Anquital, and further in the shadow Aurélie de Cheverny, leaning against the wall with closed eyes and a face of deathly whiteness. I blew again upon the cinders, and M. le Comte may or may not have guessed at my fresh intention, for of a sudden he fought like a wild-cat to break free from my grip. I did not speak—I laughed; and then Aurélie slowly approached and stood looking down upon him and me.

"Leave us," I urged, forcing d'Anquital once more upon his back. "This is no fit sight for you, Mademoiselle!"

She shuddered.

"You are going to kill him!" she whispered.

"If Mademoiselle pleases," I replied, and M. le Comte found his tongue.

"Villain!" he gasped. "Mademoiselle, this man is an accursed spy. His name—his name is——"

I brought my knee down on his breast and my hand across his mouth.

"Go, for God's sake, Mademoiselle!" I implored, "and let me settle scores with this wretch once and for all!"

"You will not kill him? Do not take his life! Thrash him if you like, Silvain, or drive him out from the château with your sword; but I cannot bear that you should run him through the body here before me."

"I will not kill him! Go!" I commanded; and, throwing one frightened glance over her shoulder at my face, Aurélie lifted the hangings of the oriel and passed out of the salon, leaving me to work my will upon d'Anquital.

The dying fire was low, but there was heat enough to crimson the point of my rapier as though it had been dipped in blood, and with a grim feeling at my heart, I drew forth the blade and forced M. le Comte's head back over my foot. The room was dark save for the warm and rosy colour of the hearth, and we must have made a strange picture, I and d'Anquital, coming sharp out of the glow—I with my hard face and eyes of steel; he with his teeth bared and a little splutter of foam trickling down

his chin, watching me with a gaze of intense horror. Once or twice he tried to speak ; more than once he tried to struggle away from me, but never in my life did I feel so supreme a strength, so vast a power, as on this night at the Château Cheverny, and at last I got Monsieur's head against my knee and kept it there.

The rapier had cooled, so I heated it again ; then, snatching it rapidly from the fire, I drew a red, smoking cross on M. le Comte's brow. He howled as a wolf, and snapped at me, but, flinging him aside, I stepped back and let him rise. Out flashed his sword, he came upon me with an extraordinarily brilliant lunge, and when, after a swift pass or so, my blade rasped beneath his and sent it spinning towards the frescoed ceiling of the salon, I had more than half a mind to run him through the lungs for mere wickedness ; but remembering my promise to Mademoiselle Aurélie, I went to the door, and threw it wide.

" Monsieur may keep his life !" I said, " and I wish him a very good-night ! "

CHAPTER XIII

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

M. LE COMTE D'ANQUITAL had only just left me, and I was solemnly meditating on the dangerous knowledge he possessed of my identity, when who should reappear but Mademoiselle. I was standing by the mantel, and the room was still dim, though I had lighted a little crystal lamp and set it on a table near the oriel, and its faint orange-glow showed me that Aurélie's face wore a wondrously sweet and enchanting expression. Some of her russet hair was all astray over her brow, and her big eyes shone with soft magnificence as she came to me, holding out her hands. She did not speak, but taking my fingers, pressed them to her lips, and I swear that I trembled from my head to my feet—the hot blood surged to my face, and for a thousand louis I could not have opened my mouth, even to stammer one word of love, though my heart was full of it.

How this woman had crept into my life—how she had weaned me from my unholy passion for Madame la Duchesse de Berri, and dragged me back from

damnation ! But for her I should have killed M. le Comte ; but for her I should have ruthlessly won the letters of conspiracy, only to bring M. le Chevalier's friends and co-conspirators to death, or to the dungeon, by giving them into the hands of the Regent that I might receive Madame as my wife, and with her power, and riches, and a title that might ring high in France.

All these thirsty longings were gone—Madame la Duchesse had tempted me once, but she should not tempt me again ; and although in a passionate moment I had drunk from her lips kisses which I took as a pledge of love, I was resolved never more to be either her tool or her lover.

Men often make such resolves—they seldom keep them, and there is an affinity 'twixt a gay reckless man and a woman of warm romance which leads them oftener towards the devil than towards Heaven.

On calm reflection, too, I was forced to confess that if Madame became my wife, it would in the end be to me as much a *mariage de convenance* as of love. I had not only wanted the Duchesse, I wanted to satiate my ambition by claiming an immense reward from M. le Duc d'Orléans, and there is nothing so damning to a man's peace as to be forever consumed by a lust after power.

Aurélié was charming me away from sin—she was

making me loathe my own vileness—she was fetching back some of the old de Championnet honour to my not altogether profligate soul, and I was determined that whether she cared a kiss or a curse for me, I at least would be to her as true a friend as any in France! And yet she was no saint—had she shown saintliness I could not have adored her: nay, by Heaven, she was just the sweetest, gallantest little heroine in the world, and a woman to the very heart's blood. She had a temper—she could storm the château down when she pleased, and I had heard her swear with fervour more than once; but for loyalty, brilliance, and charm, there was no maid on earth fit to compare with Mademoiselle de Cheverny. She held my fingers so long a time that shame covered me, and I began to draw them away.

“Mademoiselle, do not think me a sentimental blackguard—but I am unworthy of this . . . it is I, who should do homage,” I said.

“I have never met any man half so chivalrous as you,” she broke out in her impetuosity. “Silvain, I am reproaching myself a million times that I ever doubted you—that I ever scorned you——”

“Hush, Mademoiselle,” I whispered, “you know little of me, and if you knew more I think you would rather spurn my hand than kiss it. I have forgotten all your bitterness; I remember only your kind

words—your words of regret. They are treasured deep down in my heart, and if we soon part for ever, Mademoiselle, and I never look into your eyes again, I shall at least carry with me the clean thought that whereas I once sinned, I have striven to atone, and the memory of you will never leave me—no, not till I die! And afterwards, if Death is naught but a long slumber, you will come to me in my dreams, and I shall be as near Heaven as I deserve. I have no other wish, Mademoiselle, no other hope!”

I bowed my head, and when at last I took courage and looked up, her eyes were bright with tears.

“And you will leave me, Silvain?” she said.

“In good time, Mademoiselle; when Cheverny is clear of the Regent and Madame de Berri, M. l'Abbé and M. le Comte d'Anquital. There will be nothing to stay for.”

“Nothing to stay for?”

She repeated the words dreamily, the lashes shading her eyes, which glittered very prettily through her tears.

“You will be well rid of me,” I urged. “I brought you nothing but misery and danger; I have caused you nothing but sorrow; and yet, if you bid me remain, if I could serve you in any way—however small, however humble—I would do it, Mademoiselle, to the last beat of my heart.”

"Then stay," she whispered.

Her voice was low and sweet ; she was smiling upon me, and I drank in her youth, her freshness, and her beauty until I seemed aglow with a new life and a new hope. Had she stayed another moment, I might have been mad enough to declare my love for her ; but while I paused, perturbed, irresolute, she slid behind the curtains, whispered a soft "Good-night," and was gone.

I drew a huge fauteuil to the hearth, and flung myself down with a weariness that angered me. Aurélie must be rescued from Cheverny. It was not safe for her to remain in the château with d'Anquital, and I began to wish I had killed the rascal, even 'gainst her will ; but there was no getting quit of him until the Regent returned to Paris. I wondered how long he would stay, and what the morrow would bring. More than likely he would demand the letters. I cursed the day of my coming to Cheverny—I cursed the day that I was born ; and so the time passed.

An occasional footstep on the stair told me that one or two lacqueys still moved to and fro in attendance on those in the card-chamber. A strange trio—M. le Duc, his daughter the Duchesse, and Dubois—to desert the salon for the cards, and the dice, and the company of two gentlemen whom they

had never seen. They were having supper brought to them, and I could hear the rattle of the silver in the room above ; possibly they were about to initiate the Marquis and M. Maury de Saint-Cloud into the mysteries of one of the Palais-Royal orgies, and prayed that Mademoiselle Aurélie was safe in the company of Madame Rochette and out of harm's way.

The embers of the fire ceased at last to glow—the night grew colder and colder, and I was rising to retire, when a slight tapping sound on a window sent my hand instinctively to the hilt of my rapier.

All the great lattices were uncurtained : the storm had passed, and a strong slant of moonlight poured into the salon, so that I stood clear to the view of any one without. I waited, and presently the tapping recommenced. I moved to the nearest window, and gazed out upon the terrace. It was bare and glistening wet, but silent as the grave, and I stole farther down the room until, at the last of the six lattices, I saw a man's face, and some inexplicable fascination drew me closer until I stopped dead, with a heart of ice. It was the face of Silvain de Cheverny ! The moonlight was playing around him, and he was crouching a little—his long ragged coat trailing on the terrace, his hat pulled over his eyes, and a white scarf wrapped about his throat—

that throat which my rapier had pierced in the glade by Pontigny, and in my horror at the apparition I did not know that I too was crouching in the same manner as my enemy, and for awhile neither of us moved a limb or twitched an eye, until a burst of laughter and song sounding from the card-chamber above set Monsieur Silvain to tap the window again with the tips of his fingers.

I made up my mind on the instant, and opening the lattice, admitted him to the salon, holding my drawn sword in my hand.

De Cheverny bowed, and softly closed the window.

"I am come home at last, M. le Vicomte," he said. "I was not so easily killed, after all, though I confess your thrust well-nigh sent me to Purgatory. Ma foi, Monsieur, you are a beautiful duellist."

I could not answer him—I was too stunned, too amazed; so he sat down and laughed low to himself, letting the tail of his eye rest now and then upon my face, which I dare say was deadly white. It was enough to scare the wits of any man, this resurrection of the rascal Silvain, and for a moment my sangfroid, my calmness, and my gallantry deserted me altogether; but with a subtle instinct I swung the curtains over the windows, one by one, locked both doors, and lighted two or three candles. Then I turned again upon de Cheverny. He blinked,

moved his head stiffly, and pulling off his hat, threw it down by his muddy feet. He wore riding-boots, and they were spurred : he also wore a rapier, and there was a wicked, restless expression on his face that warned me I must play my game warily if I wished to dupe Monsieur Silvain and ensure his exit, dead or alive, from the château.

“ So I am not burdened with your life, after all,” I began, “ and my thrust, Monsieur, was scarcely so true as I had intended.”

“ One-eighth of an inch, and you would have slit my throat through and through ! ” he replied.

“ Well, the miscalculation was excusable. The lantern was fickle, and the moonbeams merry, but I did my best to kill you,” I said.

“ And failed,” he reflected.

“ Well, well ! ” I laughed. “ The best duellists are sometimes at fault, and you must admit the light was bad. Yet if any man ever looked like death under a sword-thrust, it was you, Monsieur, when you clapped both hands to your neck and fell.”

“ Would you have twirled your handkerchief around my throat had you thought it might stanch the flow of blood—eh, Vicomte ? ” he demanded.

“ I meant you to die,” I returned.

Silvain smiled, and stole a glance at the rings upon my fingers.

"Why did you mean me to die?" he asked.

"For the lust of killing," I lightly replied.

"No, M. le Vicomte," he said. "You wanted me dead for a purpose. When I swooned you stole my coat, my perruque, my rings, and my pardon. The rings are now on your fingers: the perruque has only given place to an excellent imitation, and I dare say you have acted me to the very life, here at Cheverny. While I lay in the snow, Monsieur, after you left me, who should appear but mine host of the Pontigny hostelry. Stealing into the wine-chamber to find us gone, he had suspected a duel, and arrived by my side almost the moment following your departure. He must have been bending over me while you were bridling your mare, for he swears he heard the rattle of her hoofs upon the frozen road."

"So he saved your life," I said.

"He and your handkerchief."

"And where have you lain since?"

"At the hostelry. The innkeeper and his wife were the only persons cognisant of my presence there. I said I was the Vicomte de Championnet. Monsieur, you stare at me; but as you have taken my name and my character, why should I not take yours? I told these people that I wanted all Paris to hear that I, the Vicomte, was dead, and they

spread the news at once. I also bribed them to keep silence as to my being at the hostelry, and the woman nursed me in secret, while her husband asked every travelling stranger who happened to call for supper, or a cup of wine, whether he had heard that M. le Vicomte de Championnet, once so well known in Paris, had been mysteriously killed in a duel close to the village. Your supposed death has been talked about, Monsieur, in all the taverns and coffee-houses, and it is said M. le Duc d'Orléans and Madame de Berri were greatly affected."

I smiled a little, and seated myself opposite to de Cheverny, with a table between us. His eyes were sunken—his face had lost its florid coarseness, but his look was as subtle and wicked as ever, and he craftily glanced at me in a manner that aroused my strongest suspicions.

"I must either kill this man," I thought, "or he will kill me."

"Why did you wish all Paris to imagine I was slain?" I asked.

"Because you desired it, Monsieur," he retorted. "You have passed as Silvain de Cheverny into M. le Chevalier's château for some black reason best known to yourself—you are here on a devil's game, and so am I! I lay snug at Pontigny until my wound healed, that you might think me dead—

that you might fancy yourself secure against detection. I gave you time to win a footing in the graces of my uncle and my cousin, and now the Chevalier is no longer alive I am come to take possession of Cheverny, and to revenge myself on you by showing you in your true character. Mine host of the inn has proved a treasure. He gained me all the news of your entrance, your reception, the death of my uncle, and your possible alliance with Mademoiselle Aurélie. He has a son who is stable-boy here. I have paid them both well from the purse which I found in the pocket of your coat, M. le Vicomte—that coat which you left in exchange for mine. Ah, you have been deep. You have played a masterly game, but I held the ace all through, and to-night I shall throw it down. And what will Mademoiselle say ? ”

I was silent.

“ And what will Mademoiselle say ? ” he repeated, thrusting his face closer to mine, and grinning from ear to ear. Certainly Monsieur Silvain was an inimitable scoundrel.

“ You know too much,” I answered, leaning my arms on the table and glaring back at him. “ You are in my way here at Cheverny, and I shall have to get rid of you, Monsieur.”

“ You will never do that,” he said.

"Are you in need of money?" I inquired.

He nodded.

"If I offer you a bribe, will you leave the château, and return no more until three days are past?"

His mocking laugh echoed through the salon.

"That you may finish your game, and, in addition, cheat me out of my inheritance! No, M. le Vicomte! Not for a million louis!"

"You are scarcely diplomatic," I murmured. "You seem to forget that I hold your pardon from the Duc d'Orléans. Unless you can exhibit that order for your release from the Bastille, I fear, Monsieur, your claim to Cheverny will gain no hearing. In the eyes of the law you are a murderer. You were branded as such when you killed M. le Comte and Mademoiselle Crespigny by Notre Dame."

"Villain!" he cried. "You propose to retain the Regent's pardon, which you stole from me after the duel!"

"Exactly!" I returned, "unless you leave the château at once and do not re-appear until my business here is ended. I can have you arrested, if I please, and taken back to Paris. Without your priceless slip of paper, signed by M. le Duc's hand, your liberty, Monsieur, or your captivity lies entirely at my disposal. The Regent is my friend. I could go to him and say, 'Monseigneur, M. Silvain de

Cheverny is too dangerous a rogue to be anywhere but in the Bastille.' I could show him your pardon, and at my request he would instantly cancel it."

"Where is the order for my release?" he cried.

"Here!" I replied, striking my breast; and all suddenly, without a shadow of warning, Silvain made a snatch at my throat across the table. I shot my head aside and arose, while he crouched in the fauteuil and gave vent to a little snarl of unutterable fury.

"Foiled, Monsieur!" I said. "When shall I make you understand how entirely your life and your fortunes are in my hands? I can have you thrown back in the Bastille or kill you here in the salon. You are at my mercy, and I am determined to see the end of you to-night. Last time we met, the light or my rapier played me false, but I do not think I shall make another blunder. You have come into my presence of your own free will, to checkmate me: I hold the right of defending myself in my own way. Follow me outside, Monsieur, and let us end the quarrel."

For answer he unbuckled his sword, and flung it, sheath and all, at my feet.

"You will not fight?" I asked.

"Sang Dieu! No, M. le Vicomte!"

"Then you cannot blame me for running my

through your heart, and so ridding myself of silent rascal."

Silvain leered. There was no fear in his eyes, a gleam of unfathomable cunning, and I drew back my rapier with a curse.

"The Vicomte de Championnet may be a scoundrel," de Cheverny replied, "but not even his worst enemy could say he was anything but a gentleman,—a second Bayard,—'sans peur et sans reproche,' to a beaten and helpless foe. I am at your feet, Monsieur, do with me what you will. This is my sword, and here am I."

Silvain gazed upon him reflectively, and a calm of wonderful serenity began to spread over his face. One might think he loved me, but I knew better. That smile meant hatred, and I watched him, I watched Silvain, marking down in my mind his easy urbanity and unruffled demeanour: his smiling mouth and the brightening glitter of his keen eyes. For a few moments I scarcely knew how to pursue my intention of clearing him out of the way: I could not kill a man who would not—he was right in calling me a scoundrel—he was also not far from the truth in believing me to be all a gentleman of some chivalry, if a scoundrel gentleman might sail together under the name of Championnet. It astonished me that he

should be so well acquainted with my doings at the château, and I congratulated myself that he knew nothing of M. le Duc's presence, and the arrival of the Duchesse and Dubois.

"Where did you leave your horse, Monsieur?" I demanded.

"At the village hostelry," he replied, and I breathed again.

"Did any one recognise you?"

"No, M. le Vicomte."

"But you are not clad in the garments I discarded after our duel: you seem to have done with the rôle of de Championnet."

"Entirely," he returned. "I have come here in my own right as Silvain de Cheverny, to denounce you to Mademoiselle my cousin."

"Will she believe you?"

"I shall claim Cheverny," he said.

"How can you, Monsieur, with no pardon to show?"

"You will give it back to me," he implored.

"Perhaps," I answered, "but not until it suits me to do so. When I am ready to make my adieux to the château—when my business here is complete,—I may have time, Monsieur, to think of restoring to you your passport to your freedom and demesne. But what would become of Mademoiselle Aurélie if

"I gave you the means of taking possession of the château in which she has spent her young life? How do I know you would behave as a gentleman of honour?"

"If there is any truth in the gossip of maids and lacqueys, M. le Vicomte has such an admiration for Mademoiselle that he would prefer to remain here as her husband, under my name," murmured Silvain, with a light laugh which maddened me.

"By her permission, I might do so," I returned.

"If I were dead," he reflected.

"Oh, that is a small matter!" I said, surveying him with a smile; "and on second thoughts, Monsieur, I have decided to put an end to you here in the salon. Do not move. Just now you appealed to my honour; but in dealing with rogues one is sometimes tempted to forget such a thing exists, and I shall have no more compunction in killing you than I should in spitting a wolf. You are shaking, M. de Cheverny; your face is grey. Permit me to offer you a cup of wine."

Crossing the room, I carefully opened the door a few inches, and was fortunate enough to catch the eye of a lacquey, who was removing the remains of the card-chamber supper, and bade him fetch me a couple of flasks of Benicario. Taking them myself from his hands, I locked the door again and ap-

proached Silvain. He was staring into the dead fire, his chin on his breast, and his mouth half-open.

"Drink, Monsieur!" I said, and handed him a cup of the wine. He drained it eagerly; the blood rushed to his face, and I let him play with the flask until it was as dry as his thirsty throat. My threat of taking his life seemed to have impressed him to such an extent that he was desirous of drowning all thought of it, and I grew secretly merry when, with trembling hands, Silvain broke the neck of the second bottle of Benicario. I leaned back against the wall, watching him.

The time was fast flying—it must have been near three in the morn—and I wondered whether I had ever spent so eventful and exciting a night. The laughter in the chamber above had ceased, and I imagined Monseigneur the Regent might have retired and the party dispersed to their rooms.

It was strange behaviour towards guests to desert them almost on their entrance to the château, but the extraordinary exigency of my position gave me no opportunity to pay even a flying visit to the card-chamber. And M. le Duc had not sent for me. Well, the discourtesy was not altogether on one side, for it was nothing short of the most outrageous insolence of the Regent and Dubois to make straight for the lansquenet table on their arrival at Cheverny.

D'Anquital was responsible for that, and when Madame la Duchesse too showed a preference for his company, and left me to tramp the terrace alone with my thoughts and my chagrin, I certainly felt no inclination to seek her presence again of my own accord.

It was insufferable, my position at the château: Monseigneur, Madame, and M. l'Abbé appeared to treat me with an utter absence of respect, and I began to believe they were suspicious of my faith to their little intrigue. That, too, I put down to M. le Comte. He had, I daresay, been whispering a hundred lies into their ears, and now I had brought him to such humiliation there seemed no doubt he would redouble his low rascality.

But at the present my fear was of Silvain, rather than of d'Anquital.

CHAPTER XIV

SILVAIN

HE began to attack the second flask of Benicarlo, darting an occasional glance at me—a glance that grew duller and more drunken as the moments passed. His face was reddening fast, and the peculiar movements of his head, poised on the stiff and still poignantly painful neck, might, at a lighter hour, have made me laugh. Suddenly he arose, swayed to and fro, and with a rattling string of hiccups requested me to hand him his rapier.

I declined.

“Then you are a coward, M. le Vicomte!” he said.

“As you please, Monsieur,” I replied. “Sit down and finish your wine.”

He obeyed, but, with the foolish persistence of the drunkard, struggled to his feet again and once more expressed a desire for a duel.

“Wait,” I answered.

‘Ah! you have turned coward,” he leered.

"While I was weak you challenged me, but now that the wine has made me strong and eager you have no further desire to fight."

I scowled at him. Would the rogue never fall asleep, or shut his eyes in tipsy, maudlin helplessness?

When he tried, for the third time, to rise, I pushed him roughly back with my hand, and, forcing a laugh, offered him the last drain of Benicarlo. He hesitated; but when I held the cup to his lips his quivering fingers closed upon it, and he drank to the dregs, falling almost at the very instant into profound and bestial slumber. I raised his eyelids; I shook him twice or thrice; but, save for the heaviness of his breathing, one might think he had been drugged.

I watched him—exultant, and yet undecided. I had mastered the fool without shedding his blood. He was now at my mercy, and my sole desire was to cause the exodus of Monsieur de Cheverny from the château to a place where he could neither meddle with me nor my future schemes. Once rid of Silvain, I thought I saw my way to deal with M. le Comte d'Anquital. The day subsequent to my arrival I had made myself conversant with most of the numerous corridors and rooms of the château, and during my explorations I was much struck

with a singular little chamber underneath the right wing of the mansion, wherein an illustrious de Cheverny, who ended his days as Bishop of Evreux, some time about Richelieu's first accession to power, was wont to say his orisons.

The room was utterly secluded ; it was reached only through a long, dark, and narrow corridor, and I determined to drag or carry Silvain down to it and lock him in. I went to the oriel door and looked out. The château was silent. Not even the shoe of a lacquey creaked or tapped upon the stair, and running back to de Cheverny I flung him with a little difficulty on my shoulder, and taking a lamp, staggered from the salon to the steps which led to the chamber. Once I stopped with a catch of my breath, thinking I heard voices, but the fear was bred from fancy, and a few minutes later I was returning to the salon, leaving Silvain to sleep off his drunkenness in the good bishop's oratory.

Putting out the candles, I went swinging up the stairs to bed with a lighter heart, and on the way peeped into the card-chamber and had a start that made my blood run warm again. The room was strewn from end to end with broken glass: wine ran about the floor like little streams of blood, and although the lansquenet table was piled with gold and bright with scattered cards, it was deserted, and

I saw that the Regent, Dubois, d'Anquital, and M. de Saint-Cloud were lying almost where they had fallen in the midst of their gambling, carousing orgie, and M. le Marquis de Merivale, kneeling by a taffeta lounge, was paying his court to the Duchesse. Madame looked superb—alluring; and although I knew the Marquis had lost his heart to her—perhaps his soul also,—and that a month ago I should have called him out and striven to send my blade under his ribs had he dared come betwixt her and me, I now—somewhat, I confess, to my surprise—hardly felt a flush when Monsieur offered his lips, and the Duchesse accepted them.

“You to-day—another to-morrow!”

Yes, d'Anquital was right, and I was now ready to believe anything of Madame la Duchesse de Berri. She had freed me by her faithlessness, and I was at liberty to play the honnête chevalier once more—to press forward towards my fate, and to live only for Mademoiselle Aurélie.

I softly drew the curtain and retired for the night.

CHAPTER XV

THE REGENT THREATENS

My first thought on awaking was to pay a visit to Silvain, and I was wondering how I might procure food and wine for him unobserved, when a lacquey knocked at the door and informed me that Monseigneur the Regent requested the pleasure of my company on the terrace. The man also remarked, in parenthesis, that it was eleven o'clock. Making a hurried toilet, I ran down to find M. le Duc strolling to and fro in a deep reverie. On seeing me, he halted, offered his hand, and drew me to the balustrade with an affectation of extreme benevolence.

"Bon jour, M. le Vicomte!" he said.

"M. de Cheverny!" I corrected. "Monseigneur sometimes forgets."

"True," he replied. "This is a world of forgetfulness. Well, then, I wish you bon jour, M. de Cheverny. You refrained from gracing the card-chamber last night. Why was that?"

"I had no heart for play or for wine," I answered;

“and if you, Monseigneur, had sought bed immediately on your arrival, you would not now be experiencing the discomfort of a hot throat and a furry tongue.” The Regent laughed.

“Insolent as ever,” he rejoined; “but you must admit I look none the worse for my debauch.”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“One day you will pay the price, M. le Duc.”

He frowned and glanced sharply at me.

“What makes you turn saint, Monsieur?”

“It is time one of us turned our back on the devil, Monseigneur.”

“I have found him very gay company,” he said, with extreme gravity; and as I vouchsafed no answer, Philippe d’Orléans assumed a magnificent and princely authority which taught me that I stood in the presence of my master.

“You know why I have come to Cheverny?” he said, his eyes freezing.

I bowed.

“Monseigneur has come to reckon with me,” I replied, giving him a look that was straight and fearless.

“Yes,” he said, “I am here to reckon with you, Monsieur. You commenced your work well. You killed Silvain de Cheverny, gained the confidence of the lamented Chevalier, and you have made a pre-

tence of being head over ears in love with that pretty witch, Mademoiselle Aurélie. You see, I know all."

"You know more than all, M. le Duc," I returned, but he ignored my suggestion.

"Having accomplished so much, you should by this time be in possession of the letters," he remarked.

I bowed again.

"Do you know where they are secreted?"

I was silent. I might have lied; I might have been diplomatic; I might have temporised; but at the moment I seemed not to care for Monseigneur's anger. My thoughts went straying away to Aurélie, and instead of the subtle schemer, the duellist, and the willing rascal who had started from the Luxembourg on a rascal's enterprise, M. le Duc d'Orléans found at Cheverny the Vicomte de Championnet of ten years ago, mellowed and steeled by the one honest passion of his later life.

"Do you know where those letters are secreted?" demanded the Regent in a terrible voice.

His wrath surprised me: I never dreamed he could give way to such a show of fury; but the more bitter his rage, the more stubborn and cool I grew.

"Monseigneur—" I began, and just then who

ould appear but Dubois, with his ferret's face and addened eyes. Philippe d'Orléans instantly became calm, and the two surveyed me in silence for moment. M. l'Abbé was the first to speak.

"M. le Vicomte has the letters?" he inquired.

"No," said M. le Duc.

"Eh?" cried the Abbé.

"You must give me more time," I answered.

"More time! And what have you been doing these weeks at Cheverny?"

I related my adventures—with reservations—from the hour of my setting forth from Paris; and so vivid was my narrative, that the Regent partially recovered his good-humour, and Dubois smiled.

"You have done well," he remarked.

"Yes," I assented, with complacency; "I am carrying out Monseigneur's instructions in every respect."

"Are you?" he asked, and there was a flash in his eyes which might have been a threat. At any rate, I took it as such; and when, a minute later, he smiled again, I understood how M. l'Abbé hated me. While Dubois smiled thus, there was danger in the air; but I was confident in my capacity to deal with him, if only the Regent would give me time to mature my plans for the future. They whispered together awhile, and I stood basking in

the faint warmth of the wintry sunbeams which played upon the terrace and stole through the windows of the grand salon. Suddenly Monseigneur's voice called me, and I went to him.

"You are not playing a double game, Vicomte?" he asked.

I felt the hot blood burn my cheeks.

"Monseigneur places small trust in me," I replied.

"Friends are sometimes false," he reflected.

"I have never been false to you, M. le Duc," was my answer.

"Do you ever intend to be?" he inquired.

"Have you any desire to abandon your quest?"

"If I were tired of my search for the letters, I should not now be within the château," I said.

"I ask you once more to give me time."

"Three days," he suggested.

"It is too long," whispered Dubois. "Monseigneur, you must be in Paris by Sunday."

"Then M. le Vicomte will understand that his business here is to be concluded by Saturday evening?"

"Exactly," said the Abbé; "and I have no doubt the papers will lie in our hands during our return to Paris. M. le Vicomte, if he be wise, will not dare to fail us. If he does——"

"What then?" I demanded, straightening my frame, and turning sharp upon him.

"Monsieur must die—that is all!"

For a little while I stayed unconscious of the presence of Dubois and the Regent. The threat stunned, but did not frighten me. Nay, I had faced death too many times to even dream of dreading its approach; but in the past I was alone,—now there was Aurélie to be protected, and my love for Mademoiselle made me want to live, if only for her sake. Heavens, and how I loved her!

Birds were chirping in the gardens below us, and the fragrant air told that spring was nigh; but to me all seemed winter, and my heart was cold. Monseigneur and the Abbé were both watching me just as they had done in the Luxembourg card-chamber, and catching the Regent's eye. I pulled myself together and faced him.

"So I am to die on the scaffold if I fail to keep my promise?" I said.

"No, not on the scaffold," returned M. le Duc.

"Nothing half so pleasant, Monsieur," grinned Dubois. "You shall not die at once—you shall not!"

I made a quick gesture of despair.

"Are you anticipating failure?" inquired the Regent, with a charming smile.

"Even the boldest enterprise sometimes ends gloriously, Monseigneur. If I cannot find the

papers—if I am unable to bring them to you, I may surely count at the least on the death of a soldier and a gentleman. You would not suffer me to perish in a dungeon—you would remember how I and mine had fought for France, and would permit me to die in my own way.”

The Regent turned away his face.

“Monsieur, you are an early pleader,” said Du-bois, “and one might think you already contemplated a little treachery—that you were indeed seriously determined to play us false. Are you in a position to secure the letters?”

“I believe, M. l'Abbé, that within three days I can lay hands on them.”

“Pardieu! why in Heaven's name did you not say so before? We are burning to crush this second conspiracy, and it is imperative that the Cardinal Alberoni's correspondence shall be published to the world. Had the Chevalier de Cheverny lived, he would have seen his subtle intrigue trodden beneath our feet, and someone must have paid the forfeit—ay, and shall pay it now. We only need these letters, Vicomte, to begin our sport, and you shall bring them to Monseigneur, or die. You may have heard of the Château Sainte Roxane?”

I shuddered.

“And the old dungeons there?”

My face betrayed my horror.


"And how men have died in them?"

I glared at M. l'Abbé in a dumb fury.

"Their fate will be yours, Monsieur, if you fail us. Au revoir—and remember."

They went together into the château.

Not a word of Madame la Duchesse de Berri—not a suggestion of my promised reward! No, Monseigneur and Dubois imagined they had bought me body and soul, and were resolved to defer payment until I came to them in my shame and dishonour with the priceless sheaves of secrets I had wheedled from Mademoiselle Aurélie. I laughed a grim laugh in my heart. What now did I want of Madame de Berri? What did I care for the richest gifts of the Regent of France—for his favour and patronage? My love for Aurélie transcended all which I once coveted, and for her I was ready to give my life as the smallest and most humble offering on the altar of my repentance. But I must see her first; and then—and then—well, there remained nothing to hope for save a short martyrdom, by the favour of God, in the dungeon of the Château Sainte Roxane.



CHAPTER XVI

THE MARQUIS MAKES A CONFESSION

“M. DE CHEVERNY!”

I swung swiftly round on my heel. It was the voice of the Marquis de Merivale, and I scarce knew whether I was glad or sorry that he had broken in upon my sombre reflections.

“Yes, M. le Marquis!” I said.

“I am come to borrow a horse of you,” he rejoined; and then, for the first time, I noted the deathly whiteness of his face. Monsieur was undoubtedly at war with fortune; and an Englishman, however gay and debonair may be his soul, takes bad luck with the devil of an ill grace.

“I trust you do not mean to desert Cheverny,” I said.

“That is my intention,” he replied.

“Stay until Monseigneur the Regent has gone,” I suggested, “and Madame la Duchesse.”

“I’ll be damned if I do!” he cried.

“M. le Marquis, you are either in trouble or in love.”

"They are one and the same thing," Monsieur answered. "I am tired of Cheverny, M. de Cheverny, and I am weary of France. Will you lend me a horse or no?"

"I have only one," I said, "and I cannot spare her, even to you."

"There are a dozen in your stables!" he exclaimed.

"They are not mine, M. le Marquis."

"Not yours?" he cried. "But all Cheverny is in your hands!"

"Nay!" I replied. "It is still Mademoiselle Aurélie's. Go to her, Monsieur, and borrow as many horses as you please. She is châtelaine here."

His eyes widened in amazement. He took a few short steps along the terrace, turned to me again, and, to my intense surprise, offered his hand.

"I have done you wrong, M. de Cheverny. I have thought evil of you."

"Many have done the same," I remarked.

"Am I too late to ask your pardon?" he inquired.

"It is never too late to right a wrong, M. le Marquis; but I daresay in the past you have done well in thinking me a very black scoundrel."

"I was mistaken," he hastened to admit.

"Not altogether," I replied. "But what matter? Monsieur has offered me his hand, and I have taken it. Let the past die!"

"Yes," he said. "Let it die."

"Mademoiselle ma cousine will be sorry to lose you," I ventured to suggest, and his face turned a fine rich scarlet.

"I believe you to be a gentleman of honour," he replied, in his old charming way.

I bowed.

"And therefore," M. le Marquis continued, "I have no scruple in making you a confession."

I bowed again.

"As Monsieur pleases," I observed.

"I came here to woo Mademoiselle Aurélie," he announced. "The Chevalier and my father were old friends, and they arranged that I should marry her. I was quite willing."

My heart leaped, but I stayed silent, and outwardly calm.

The Marquis lowered his voice and proceeded:

"At my first words of love Mademoiselle laughed in my face. I laughed too,—it is my characteristic curse that no one takes me seriously,—but I had by no means lost hope of winning her when you arrived."

"Yes, Monsieur, and what then?" I said.

"Everything went wrong from the time you caught us cock-fighting in the chamber," he returned.

"I was an unwelcome guest to you all," I murmured.

"Not to the Chevalier. You were his nephew—you had grown up beneath the roof of his château; you were his brother's legacy to him, and blood is thicker than wine, Monsieur. It was quite natural he should receive you gladly."

"But you and Mademoiselle possessed sharper eyes, M. le Marquis. You saw 'rogue' written on my face."

I could not resist a little thrill of malice in thus throwing the bitterness of my reception in his teeth, and the Marquis flushed again.

"We agreed to let the past die," he quietly remarked. "M. de Cheverny, I have given up all intention of pleading afresh for the hand of Mademoiselle Aurélie. As you, I presume, are acting somewhat as her guardian, it is only right that I should tell you. So I leave for Paris at once, and shall return to England within the month. If I could be of service to Mademoiselle, I would stay. I would wipe out my dishonour with my life, if 'twere possible to do so!"

"Dishonour!" I said.

"Yes, Monsieur, my dishonour—call it lack of loyalty if you will. Last night I made a declaration of love to Madame la Duchesse de Berri. I forgot Aurélie, I forgot that I had sworn to win her, and Madame's fascination played the devil with me! There, M. de Cheverny, you have the truth!"

"And did Madame——?" I began.

"Last night we were as lovers—to-day she laughs at me," broke in the Marquis, with astonishing passion.

"Ah!" I said, and for the moment my breath came fast. *Pardieu!* what in Heaven's name would happen next?

"Yes, she laughs at me," he repeated. "And what do you think she told me, Monsieur?—that she was your promised wife—she, the daughter of Philippe d'Orléans, Regent of France! She whispered it in my ear this morning when I met her in the salon."

I could not speak—I was dumfounded at the audacity of the incorrigible Duchesse. I should not now have been surprised to hear that she had made love to d'Anquital, and M. Maury de Saint-Cloud, or even Dubois, in addition to the Marquis de Merivale. *Ciel*, what a woman! And to boast openly that she was to become my wife! Was she playing with my name for mere wanton malice, or

had she in reality an occasional passion for me? God only knew!

"Was Madame lying?" demanded the Marquis.

"How can I say?" I returned.

"Honour is scarce among women!" he observed, with extreme bitterness. "There is none true—no, not one!"

"There is Mademoiselle Aurélie," I said. "M. le Marquis, you have been frank to me; I will now be frank to you. Madame la Duchesse and I once exchanged vows; but they are broken, and you are free to win her love."

"The love of Madame blossoms at night, and is dead by the morning," he replied, "When she told me she was your betrothed, Monsieur, I could have killed you."

I smiled.

"I know this feeling well, M. le Marquis. There is Mademoiselle Aurélie at the window, and if you insist on making your adieux, the present is an excellent opportunity."

"Good-day, Monsieur," he said; and our hands met again. I watched him enter the salon with a brilliant effort at gaiety, and wondered what chance I should have had of winning Mademoiselle if he were my rival. I began to understand something of Aurélie's pride—her reserve, her extraordinary

independence. When d'Anquital thrust himself into the château she called on me for aid ; when she faced him in the salon it was I, and not the Marquis, whom she named as her champion.

No ; she did not fly to M. de Merivale. And why ? Because the intensity of her pride restrained her from claiming the protection of the man who had offered her his hand and fortune, and been repulsed ; because M. le Marquis should not think that she had changed her mind, and now desired his love—that he should not think she was recognising in him her one friend. It is true she called him while I held the door on the night of M. le Chevalier's death ; but as soon as she admitted my right to remain at Cheverny, and owned me as the master, there were no more appeals to the Marquis. And yet I could not imagine any woman failing to fall in love with him.

I was by no means sure that Aurélie, far down in her heart, had not sometimes wished to change protectors ; and as for Madame de Berri's fascination—well, stronger men even than M. de Merivale had succumbed to it. Madame's lovers were like moths around a light—they were drawn by an almost irresistible charm to her feet ; and I do not believe that any woman in France possessed such a subtle power to lure fools to her pleasure as the Grand Duchesse of the Luxembourg.

In a little while I saw two horsemen ride slowly down towards the village, and knew that the Englishman had kept his word, and was on his way to Paris with his valet and his fighting-cocks. My next thought was of Silvain, and procuring food and wine, I carefully descended to the little oratory, unlocked the strong door, and looked in. He was still slumbering. His muddy coat trailed the floor; his shirt was torn and sodden by the Benicarlo he had spilled over it, and his breeches were in rags. I actually felt some sort of compassion towards the wretch, and, securing the door, I stealthily fetched some of my own clothes, and, shaking his shoulders, forced him at last to arise and array himself in a braided riding-jacket and a clean shirt. With my assistance, he made a slovenly toilet, and drank greedily from the wine flask; but, although he recognised he was in my power, Monsieur Silvain never so much as opened his lips.

More than once I spoke to him. His only answer was a sly leer; and after a time, growing thoroughly weary of his company, I backed again towards the door, leaving him standing just underneath an old blurred painting of Cardinal de Cheverny. Then, as I was leaving, I caught a glimpse of his profile, and the peculiar resemblance between us struck me afresh. Given my clear eyes and

brown wear-and-tear face, instead of his own coarsened visage, and he might easily pass as the *Vicomte de Championnet*. I banged the door on him, and he laughed. I little knew what that laugh meant; but there came an hour when I understood it to the full.

I was fortunate enough to find *Aurélié* seated with *Madame Rochette* in an anteroom of the salon. Not a sign of the Regent, *Dubois*, or *Madame la Duchesse*. And *d'Anquital*, where was he, with the cross my red-hot rapier had marked upon his brow? On glancing into the card-chamber the previous night, I noticed that a great tangle of hair was tumbling down almost to his closed, drunken eyes; and so, to hide the scar, he would have to wear it all his life; How the *grandes dames* of the *Palais-Royal* would laugh on his return! Sooner or later the secret of that cross would leak out, and I could realise that *M. le Comte* hated and loathed me more than anyone in the whole world for thus branding him, as one might brand a galley-slave, with a mark which would last until his body became dust.

"So we have lost *M. le Marquis*," I said, sunning myself in *Mademoiselle's* smiles.

"Yes, he was tired of *Cheverny*," she replied, and *Madame Rochette* discreetly vacated her chair and

retired to her boudoir. Madame knew little, but she guessed much, and I owe her an eternal gratitude.

"Where is the Duchesse?" I asked.

"With the rest of our guests," said Aurélie.

"Silvain, when shall we be rid of them?"

"Soon," I returned. "Have patience, Mademoiselle; have patience."

"They are now gone riding," she answered.

"All of them?"

"Yes, even M. de Saint-Cloud."

"He is probably in love with Madame la Duchesse," I observed, and Aurélie's eyes gleamed.

"You have not encountered Madame this morning?" I asked.

"Neither her nor the others," she returned. "M. le Comte d'Anquital has taken your horse. What do you think of that, Monsieur?"

"Indeed!" I said, my blood warming.

"Did he ask your permission?"

I shook my head.

"Why do they dare use Cheverny as though 'twere their own?" cried Mademoiselle, with exquisite fire. "Why do you allow them?"

"One cannot say 'nay' to the Regent of France," I replied.

"The grooms tell me they will be back in an

hour," she said. "I cannot meet them, Silvain. I would rather work in the fields all my life as a peasant-woman—I would rather die than remain in the château another week! Take me away!"

"You are overwrought," I said. "Come, Mademoiselle, there are yet horses in the stables. Let us ride together, and spend the day among the woods. Perhaps some escape for you may suggest itself. I had thought of M. Maury de Saint-Cloud's château as a possible refuge during the rest of the time Monseigneur will be here. But he leaves for Paris on Saturday."

"And will Madame la Duchesse accompany him, and Dubois, and M. le Comte?"

"Undoubtedly," I said.

"Then I will remain at Cheverny," she replied. "I do not like M. de Saint-Cloud, and here, at least, I shall be sure of your protection."

"Always, Mademoiselle," I answered, and she ran off to array herself in the white and silver riding-habit which suited her so charmingly.



CHAPTER XVII

TRAGEDY

AH, that day among the woods—were there ever hours so sweet and yet so bitter? To love Mademoiselle with a love that was maddening—to ride on and on at her side—to feel that she might at the last be won, and yet to know my way led not to her, but to one of the dungeons of the Château Sainte Roxane. Sang Dieu, what a thought, and what a misery! Yes, I was resolved to die: I was resolved to give my life instead of the letters of conspiracy into the hands of M. le Duc d'Orléans.

Monseigneur, with characteristic generosity, had pardoned Madame du Maine, and forgotten her first intrigue: it was scarce likely he would be so merciful a second time; and if Madame suffered, others must suffer too—perhaps Aurélie among them, unless she consented to accompany M. le Duc or d'Anquital to the Palais-Royal.

I rode homeward almost in silence. Sometimes Mademoiselle rallied me on my reticent gloom: sometimes she strove to fetch a smile to my lips by a flash of her ready wit; but I knew her gaiety was forced, and so great a coward had I become that

when the lights of Cheverny twinkled through the pearly mists of evening I was still powerless to tell her that ere long I must leave her to fight the battle of life alone.

More than once I was tempted to break my word of honour to the Regent, and to compel Mademoiselle to fly with me ; more than once I swore to ignore my sacred oath to Madame la Duchesse ; but then the old pride swelled up again in my heart, and I determined to be true. No, neither the Regent nor Madame should say I could not keep a promise, and, however base they proved, however faithless, I would show them that I was not unworthy of the name of de Championnet. I would pay the whole penalty : I would wipe out all the stains on my honour with whatever punishment God might choose, even though it were a loathsome death in the Château Sainte Roxane !

And so, in perfect silence, Aurélie and I alighted from our saddles and ascended to the terrace. We were met by Monseigneur's valet with a request from the Regent that we would join him at lansquenet in the card-chamber at eight o'clock.

I looked at Mademoiselle. She was watching me, and the next moment I had made up my mind.

"Tell Monseigneur that Mademoiselle de Cheverny and I will be there," I said ; and the lacquey slipped away to his master, leaving me to the reproaches of Aurélie.

"I thought you would have replied 'No,'" she began. "How can I meet those men and Madame la Duchesse?"

"Mademoiselle, it would not have been politic to refuse," I urged. "Believe me, I know best."

"I cannot understand it all," she said, "and sometimes, Silvain, I doubt you, even now."

In my misery I bit my lips until they bled.

"Your behaviour has been so strange," she continued, her voice growing sharp and hard.

"Yes, Mademoiselle," I replied.

"And you are so afraid of the Regent."

"For your sake alone," I said; and then, to my surprise, she burst into a great flood of tears and ran away up the stairs. When God created woman He placed beside man the greatest puzzle that ever He made, and I knew not whether Aurélie was angry, sad, or sorry; but at eight o'clock, when I emerged from my room, I found her waiting for me at some little distance from the card-chamber, and we entered together under the insolent blaze of Madame la Duchesse de Berri's eyes.

"A pair of truants!" laughed Monseigneur, as I made my bow; "but where is the third?"

"Your Highness means M. le Marquis de Merivale?" I said, seating myself by M. de Saint-Cloud. "Well, by this time he should be nearing Paris."

Madame's face was a storm.

"Nearing Paris?" exclaimed the Regent.

"He had grown weary of Cheverny," I returned, with a wicked thrill in my heart. It was good sport to watch the Duchesse.

"But he possessed not even the manners to make his adieux," said Monseigneur.

"Save to Mademoiselle, M. le Duc, and to me," and my glance wandered again to the face of Madame. It was now a picture of serenity, and if the Duchesse ever experienced the ill-fortune of being driven from the Luxembourg into the streets, she would never starve while she remained so great an actress.

Aurélié, at M. l'Abbé's invitation, took a chair at a lansquenet table, and with exquisite abandon commenced to deal the cards. All her reserve had gone, she was brilliant and fascinating to a perfectly alarming degree, and Monseigneur, Dubois, and M. de Saint-Cloud clustered round her with a shower of light flattery that might have turned the head of a woman less mistress of her heart and her will. She bandied words with M. le Duc, she hid her laughing face at a most indelicate jest of the disreputable Abbé, and when M. de Saint-Cloud would have claimed the privilege of an old friend and kissed her fingers, Mademoiselle snatched them away and presented his lips with the fringe of her fan.

I looked at Madame la Duchesse, and she surveyed me in silence, and then I noticed that d'Anquital was not in the chamber. Had he, too, flown from Cheverny? I crossed the room and took a seat by Madame's side. She was half reclining on the taffeta lounge, and I never saw her look more splendid—more bewitching. She was in purple to-night: her hair was thick with jewels, and as she lazily moved her fan I could feel its perfume on my face, while now and then her languorous eyes would open to their fullest brilliance, hold mine for an instant chained, and slowly close again until one might think she slept.

Aurélie and her illustrious partners were playing lansquenet with a wild warmth; the laughter grew with the slapping of the cards upon the table, and the chink-chink of the gold, and I began to be afraid of Mademoiselle—I began to dread that she was intoxicated by a pleasure which would draw her away to Paris, and to the life which must inevitably accompany her presence at the Palais-Royal. Monseigneur was a charming lover, and there were few women in France who would care to resist the attentions of the Regent—fewer still who would scorn him.

Again and again my glance stole off to the lithe, swaying figure of Aurélie de Cheverny, as she recklessly bent now towards one, then towards another of the players,—again and again I shivered at the

sound of their laughter, and at last Madame de Berri touched my arm.

"What is the matter with you, M. le Vicomte?" she whispered.

I instinctively recoiled from her.

"Nothing, Madame," I replied.

"Have you forgotten me altogether?" she inquired, in a still softer voice.

"There are some things one can never forget," I said.

"Ah," she returned, "but to-morrow, Vicomte——"

"What then, Duchesse?" I asked.

"You will redeem your promise," she murmured, "and I——"

"Yes, Madame," I breathed, with intense apprehension. "And you——"

"I shall be yours, she said, in a voice so low that it scarcely reached my ears.

"But, Madame, you do not love me," I replied. "You openly scorned me before M. le Comte d'Anquital."

"Oh, the poor Comte!" she whispered. "He is mad for love of me! But can I help that, Monsieur? Can I be blamed if a hundred men come of their own free-will to kiss my feet?"

"They do not always content themselves with kissing your feet, Duchesse. They seek your lips, and sometimes find them."

"Vicomte! you are insufferable! You have quarrelled with M. le Comte, and that is what has made you so bitter."

"The truth is often unpalatable, Madame. I wish no ill to M. d'Anquital."

"You have fought him already," she said, with a woman's shrewdness. "Why does he wear his hair over his eyes? You have fought him, Monsieur, and your sword has hurt his brow. There, I have guessed aright, and you cannot deny it."

"There is no woman in the world save one, worth the shedding of a man's blood," I returned, and the Duchesse touched my arm again, almost caressingly.

"I am yours—always," she whispered. "But you must not have another duel with M. le Comte about me. Go and make friends with him. He is somewhere on the terrace or in the salon."

"Thirsting for my life," I lightly replied, and I could have laughed to think how Madame was deceived in me: how she imagined I was still within her power: how she was convinced that d'Anquital and I had fought in a mad rivalry for her love.

"Why did M. le Marquis de Merivale leave so suddenly?" she asked, after a dreamy soliloquy.

"Madame la Duchesse knows best," I answered. "Sacré! what is that?"

I sprang to my feet. Madame's face turned white as snow. The card-players had arisen, and the lansquenet table lay on the floor, the rich violet

carpet shimmering with scattered gold, when the cry came a second time, and trailed off into a loud, sharp scream. Then silence fell. I flung open the window, and looked down upon the terrace. The night was black and moonless, but the red light that streamed through one of the great lattices of the salon showed me the low marble balustrade, and just at the foot of one of the thick pillars, two dark, intertwined forms.

"Mort Christ!" I gasped, and leaving the card-chamber, I ran down the stairs, raced through the salon, and, followed by half-a-dozen frightened lacqueys, tore open a window and stepped out upon the terrace, calling for candles.

Breath of France! and what a sight met my eyes! There at my feet lay Silvain de Cheverny, his hands and feet fastened to the throat of M. le Comte d'Anquital, whose awful face told me he had died the death of a strangled wolf. His stiff fingers still clutched a sword, bloodied at the point; and by the little red stream that trickled down de Cheverny's back, I knew he had been stabbed from behind by M. le Comte's rapier. Then, in an instant, the whole tragedy flashed upon me. Silvain must have escaped from the Cardinal's oratory and made his way to the terrace, thinking, no doubt, to give me the devil's own fright, or, better still, to enter the château and spring a mine on me in the presence of Aurélie. Now I understood his leer and mocking

laugh; I saw that he, and not I, held the cards since the moment I locked him in the chamber, and he only remained there to await the most favourable opportunity of walking round to the salon and surprising me by a masterly coup d'état.

Some secret exit from the oratory was known to him, and he was stealing along the corridor, gloating o'er his plans, when d'Anquital, nursing his hatred for me well back in the shadow of the château, thought that 'twas I who came, and was unashamed to settle scores by playing the despicable assassin. I wondered who had screamed: it might have been Silvain, but I would sooner think it was M. le Comte, when de Cheverny made his spring, with the life-blood rippling from his back, and fixed his teeth as fast as a hound on d'Anquital's throat.

My thoughts stunned me as I snatched a guttering candle from a lacquey and bent down to take my last long look at them both, and M. le Comte's face was horrifying enough to give me bad dreams for a month. When I raised my head again Monseigneur the Regent, accompanied by the rest, was stepping out of the salon, and in a moment Madame's little white slippers were wet with the blood that ran from Silvain's wound to race around her feet.

"Mille diables!" cried Dubois, forgetting all caution. "It is Silvain de Cheverny!" And M. le Duc echoed his words.

"Silvain de Cheverny!" It was the voice of Ma-

demoiselle Aurélie, and her face was enough to scare even a ghost ; while the Duchesse, completely losing command of her wits, burst into a sudden peal of hysterical laughter—laughter that made me thrill. For the instant I think Madame went mad, and I shall never forget her eyes as they clung with an awful fascination to the faces of de Cheverny and M. le Comte ; and when a long-drawn sob from Aurélie forced me to glance round, I saw her reel back against the balustrade with both hands clasped across her brow. Then she swept past us into the salon with a magnificent calmness which appalled me. I followed her in the wake of Dubois and Monseigneur, who led Madame la Duchesse by the hand, and then, motioning the lacqueys and M. de Saint-Cloud away, the Regent closed the window.

It seemed to me that silence reigned for hours, and I give you my word that I trembled in my shoes. But soon the old courage came flooding back again—I had thrown my last card, and the game was up, so there was nothing left but to face Aurélie, the Duchesse, and M. le Duc d'Orléans, and to face them well !

CHAPTER XVIII

DE CHAMPIONNET PLAYS THE MAN

AURELIE was the first to break the silence.

"Monsieur, if Silvain de Cheverny lies dead on the terrace, who are you?" she demanded, in a voice that was clear and cold as ice.

"Mademoiselle," I replied, "I am the Vicomte de Championnet!"

It was as though a bomb had fallen in the salon. Monseigneur let off a string of oaths: M. l'Abbé's blasphemy was loud enough to rattle up to heaven, and Madame de Berri flung herself back in a seat with the word "Fool! fool!" ringing again and again from her lips.

And Aurélie stood by the hearth, white and calm, gazing at me with a look that was terrible.

"Mademoiselle de Cheverny," I said, "I came to the château in the guise of your cousin that I might worm from the Chevalier some secrets relating to a certain intrigue which M. le Duc imagined had been fostered by Cardinal Alberoni and the Duchesse du Maine. You know how I succeeded?"

"To my cost, Monsieur," she replied.

I felt my blood growing colder, but I did not flinch.

"You are now beyond even my hatred," continued Aurélie. "You are more base than M. le Comte d'Anquital."

"You lash me cruelly, Mademoiselle."

"And how have you served me, M. le Vicomte? How have you kept faith? I will not curse you, God will do that: but my only hope is this, Monsieur, that every night you will be haunted by visions of those whom you have played false; that you will see them wending their way to the dungeon or the scaffold, and feel that you, and you alone, sent them to their fate. And what will Madame du Maine now think of her Bayard? You were not killed in the duel near Pontigny after all—that, too, was a trick to blind our eyes!"

"Yes, Mademoiselle, I knew Silvain de Cheverny was coming to the château. I waylaid him on the road, and left him for dead. I took his clothes and his rings, and deceived you; and there is little need for me to say more. All was going well until Silvain re-appeared, and I was forced to make him drunk that I might hide him from you."

"And where did you hide him?" she asked.

"In the oratory," I replied. "I locked him in." She laughed mirthlessly.

"Did you know that behind the Cardinal's portrait there was a secret exit from the château? Ah! I see you were duped, M. le Vicomte, and that M. le

Comte d'Anquital unwittingly killed Silvain instead of you. I wish he had made no such mistake ; it was you who most deserved death."

I bowed my head.

"And what of the letters?" she asked. "Have you not given them to the Regent?"

"No, Mademoiselle."

"Blood of the Saints!" cried Dubois. "Are they, then, in your possession?"

"Yes, M. l'Abbé," I answered ; and pulling out the little packet from my breast, I held it to his gaze and to the gaze of the Duchesse and M. le Duc d'Orléans. Their amazement was something indescribable. Dubois made a snatch at the letters, and was thrust reeling aside : Monseigneur caught the fierce flash of my eye, and refrained from an advance ; and Madame, with an emotional exuberance which startled me, rose from her seat, and, falling on her knees, pressed her pretty lips to my hand.

"Audran!" she said, "you have triumphed—you have won them after all. Give them to me, my love, my king!"

I looked down on her and smiled.

"Madame, they are not mine to give!"

"Not yours?" she cried. "Not yours?"

"What do you mean?" demanded the Regent.

"Monsieur is playing the fox!" murmured Dubois, and I saw that Aurélie was watching me like a woman in a dream.

"Why prolong my torture, M. de Championnet?" she asked. "Yield the letters to Monseigneur or the Duchesse, and then your work will be done. You will receive your blood-money, and be satisfied—you will also, I daresay, receive Madame's caress, and win a place amid her many loves."

"Mademoiselle!" exclaimed the Duchesse, springing to her feet. "Mort Christ, you shall pay for this!" But Aurélie's only answer was to turn her back upon the daughter of the Regent of France, and then, before ever I could avoid her embrace, Madame had flung her arms around my neck and was hanging to my breast. But I saw the flash of malice in her splendid eyes—I saw the glance of supreme triumph that she cast towards Mademoiselle, and in a moment I knew the gay Duchesse was spinning around me the coils of her inimitable wiles in a desperate attempt to madden Aurélie de Cheverny, and to draw me back to my old allegiance to herself.

Yes, Madame was an extraordinary woman, and the closer she clung to me the nearer her fingers were creeping to the letters of conspiracy which, up to the present, I had warily held out of her reach.

Aurélie had turned again to watch us, Dubois stood with his back to the door, and M. le Duc was content to await the issue of Madame's diplomacy. But it was Mademoiselle, and not the Duchesse, who hastened the end.

"So it was you who tempted M. le Vicomte to betray us!" she cried.

Madame's great eyes opened lazily.

"I, Mademoiselle?" she replied, attempting to draw my face down to hers. "And why not? I have promised to become the wife of M. de Championnet."

I tore her white arms from my neck and thrust her away from me.

"It is a lie!" I cried. "I swear it, by God and His Holy Mother!"

The salon grew so still that there was no sound to be heard but the flames of the fire, which leapt upward with a noise like the loud beating of many hearts, and in the midst of this great calm I dropped on my knee and stretched out the letters to Mademoiselle Aurélie.

"Take them back!" I said; and my voice was as hoarse as that of a crow. "Take them back, and forget me, Mademoiselle! This is all I ask. I was strong in temptation; but I am stronger in my remorse—and if death will pay the forfeit, then I am ready to die?"

I do not think Aurélie heard my last words, but with a low, throbbing cry she snatched the letters from my hand, and tearing through the seals, began to throw them one by one into the fire.

"Stop her, Dubois! quick, quick, fool of an Abbé!" cried the Regent, but I whipped out my

sword on the instant and faced them both. Monseigneur's blade was already bare, and he came at me with a succession of thrusts which I foiled in my easiest manner, and Dubois, making a rush upon Mademoiselle, received a blow from my foot that sent him rolling towards Madame de Berri; but when the Duchesse herself passionately leapt forward, I was forced to lower my point that it might not stain her white bosom with her blood. And Sang Dieu, to hear Madame swear! I snatched at her arm, but she swept free, and sprang like a beautiful tigress upon Mademoiselle de Cheverny.

Too late! Aurélie had flung the last letter to the thirsty flames, and all Madame could do in her intense fury was to stamp her little foot, and then before one might guess her intention she struck Mademoiselle fiercely on the face. Her rings cut Aurélie's cheek, and I held my breath, anticipating such a scene as had never before stirred the château; but instead of bursting into a maddening torrent of fury, Mademoiselle calmly wiped away the blood, her eyes hard and bright as diamonds, and catching Madame's wrist, drew her close and whispered in her ear.

The Duchesse gave a light ringing laugh, and I knew something great was going to happen, for there is generally the devil to pay when two such women as Madame la Duchesse and Aurélie de Cheverny throw down the challenge.

With superb hauteur, Madame de Berri quitted the salon, scarce deigning to flash me a look, and Monseigneur, sheathing his rapier, prepared to follow her. He was quivering with passion, and I knew that this burning of the Cardinal's letters had roused him from his usual geniality into something like relentless rage.

"To-morrow, M. le Vicomte, you will prepare for an incarceration in the Château Roxane!" he said, with a savage glance at me.

I bowed my head, and Dubois, standing on tiptoe, began to whisper fresh devilry into his ear. Peste! how I loathed the wretch!

M. le Duc smiled.

"M. l'Abbé is right," he said. "You deserve nothing better than the Frog dungeon, M. de Championnet."

I could scarcely repress a shudder.

"The Frog dungeon, Monseigneur?" I cried. "Mon Dieu, anything but that!"

"You have played me false, and shall pay my price," he returned; "and, mark you, Monsieur, I mean to make you die the death of a traitor to his country and his word!"

"Better that than a traitor to my heart!" I bitterly exclaimed, and M. le Duc laughed low.

"Of what sanctity is the heart of Audran de Championnet?" he said. "Vicomte, I will waste no more words on you. Retire to your chamber

within an hour, and consider yourself on parole until a file of soldiers appears to escort you to the Château Sainte Roxane. And when next you embark on an emprise, Monsieur, it will be towards Purgatory, so prepare yourself for that !”

He went out, followed by the Abbé, the door banged, and I was left alone with Mademoiselle Aurélie. On the broad terrace lay the dead bodies of Silvain and of M. le Comte d'Anquital, and I could hear the whisperings of the wind among the trees which fringed the parterre, as though it had come to sing to them a song of death.

It is ever thus : he who would live must die, and he who would die must live to suffer ; and life, at the best, is but the veriest lottery. So 'tis well to be gay at all times ; but if you cannot be gay, be strong ; and if you cannot be strong, pray that a woman may fetch some light to your eyes and some fire to your soul, for there is no buckler in the world like a woman's love !

CHAPTER XIX

LOVE OR HONOUR

"M. LE VICOMTE is silent," said Aurélie; and my first impulse was to cover my face with my hands. I feared a repetition of her bitter reproach, and, by my soul's salvation, I would rather have blown out my brains than have been forced to endure another lash of her scorn; but when after a time I took courage and stole a glance across the salon, there was Mademoiselle gazing at me with the saddest and most 'witching smile that ever shone on woman's face.

She was paler even than I, and I saw that the hem of her frock was crimsoned here and there where it had swept along the terrace over Silvain's running blood. The lacqueys were removing the bodies, for I could hear the shuffling of their feet, and we both stood listening until the tramp, tramp had died away.

M. le Duc d'Orléans had given me an hour's grace, and I meant to spend it in making my peace with Aurélie before I said farewell to her for ever. More than once I tried to begin, but my tongue

was tied, and I could not speak. The salon stifled me; but at last my heart found words, and I poured out my confession like a torrent to Mademoiselle, who stood all the time leaning motionless against the low massive mantel, and two great candles in silver sconces shed a red light o'er her face and shoulders. Her eyes were incomparable—sometimes they would brighten, sometimes they would flash, and once I saw the tears sparkling like little jets of crystal on her lashes. There were moments when I thought she trembled, and grew whiter even than snow; but she stayed mute until I had told my tale from my interview with Monseigneur at the Luxembourg up to the hour of the tragedy on the terrace, withholding only the incident of my keeping her from the chamber while M. le Chevalier drew his last breath. No; I had felt no power to lay that shameful act before her judgment. I kept that crowning sin deep in the depths of my soul, lest she should call on God to curse me.

Many were the nights I had waked with a start, thinking I heard her voice cursing my name, and sleep was gone from me until the morn; and even now in my dreams I sometimes hear that cry. Some day God may let me forget; but the least thing a scoundrel can do is to pay for his iniquity; and though I was never the man to sing "Gloria in excelsis" when fate ran hard against me, or welcome the devil's own luck with a loud "Te Deum,"

I had always received life's ironies with a gay sang-froid which had invariably braced me to carry my cross with a shrug and a laugh. But to-night, in Mademoiselle's presence, I was no better than a coward.

Piece by piece I had unfolded my baseness and dishonour, striving neither to hide my rascality, nor to gloss over my shame, and Aurélie heard me without flinching to the end.

"Is that all?" she asked, her eyes half closed; and then of a sudden I resolved to drain my cup to the dregs.

"No, Mademoiselle," I said; "there is one thing more. M. le Chevalier did not die at my hands, but I was in the chamber all the while. I locked the door lest you should enter, and stayed by the bed until his life had ebbed. Yes, I was there while he called your name; I was there when you answered him, and beat the door with your hands; I was there while he cursed me, and while you cried, 'Open the door, Silvain!' and called me a devil. Mademoiselle, he had discovered that I was not Silvain de Cheverny, and rather than let him shout the truth into your ears, I was ready to sacrifice all the peace which your presence might have brought him while he lay in extremis, to my own unpardonable villainy. So I stayed there till the end, and then escaped by the lattice before the Marquis and your lacqueys broke in the door, to find M. le

Chevalier had gasped his last breath. Whether you believed all my lies when I encountered you afterwards in the salon, I cannot say, but now you know how base a rascal I have been, and can judge me from my own condemnation. I cannot hope you will forgive; I cannot hope you will forget, though I would give my body and soul for one single word of pity or of pardon! Mademoiselle . . ."

My voice was a prayer. Aurélie's head was turned aside, and her face was hidden from me, but long ere she spoke I knew my fate would be in accordance with my deserts. Her answer came in a whisper—so sharp and intense that the sweat broke out on my brow, and I—yes, even I, de Championnet, the duellist and the scoundrel, trembled as though I were standing before my God at the last Great Day.

"I can never forget; I can never forgive. I have neither pardon nor pity. Monsieur, for Christ's sake leave me, that I may see you no more!"

I stood in silence, her clear words cutting into my heart like a sword; then Mademoiselle suddenly swayed, lost her hold on the mantel, and sunk down in a swoon before ever I could spring forward to catch her in my arms. I stooped, pressed my cold lips to her little clenched hand, and, neither heeding nor caring whither I went, thrust open a heavy lattice and stepped out upon the terrace.

Snow was again falling, and the magnificent façade of the château was already plastered by the thick flakes that shot like feathery arrows through the blackness of the night ; but I went down into the parterre like a man in a dream, and wandered to and fro amid the naked trees and the beds which in springtime were bright with many flowers.

My heart was dead. Mademoiselle Aurélie had given me my coup de grâce, and the reckless joy of life, with its old charm of wine and cards, war and women, was gone from me for ever. Had God smitten me blind in the midst of my despair, I would not have cared a curse,—had He struck me dead, I would have blessed Him ; but it is man's unwritten fate that he shall pay through the heart for the sins of his head and hand.

Another day, and I should be in the Château Sainte Roxane ; but what would become of Mademoiselle ? Ah, the thought that M. le Duc d'Orléans might yet draw a net around her feet stung me again. I saw her accompanying him to the Palais-Royal, or Versailles. I pictured her surrounded by all the brilliance and vice of Paris, to be drawn at last into the inevitable whirlpool ; and though the snow came tumbling down in great white clouds, and spread like a shroud over the château and the valley below, I continued to pace the parterre with a brain and heart of fire. Aurélie had driven me out of her presence, and I could not go back, so I stayed in the

silent gardens until my hour of grace was nearly gone.

"M. de Championnet!"

I started, and then the whisper came again—a little louder, a little more distinct—and I saw a shadowy figure flit out from a double fringe of almond-trees that bordered the parterre.

"M. de Championnet!"

"Who is there?" I answered, and my teeth were clashing like castanets.

"It is I—Aurélié de Cheverney."

"Mon Grand Dieu!" I gasped, and then, 'forever I could catch my breath, Mademoiselle's fingers were sinking deeply into my soft, wet sleeve.

"M. le Vicomte," she whispered, "I awoke from my swoon, and I was alone. I have come to you again;" and I swear I cannot say how it happened, but of a sudden her hands slid into mine, and though the snow fell with pitiless persistency through the dark vault of night, I seemed to see her eyes shining up at me as if their light could never fade.

"Mademoiselle, you have no business here," I murmured. "You will catch your death of chill, and, by Saint Aignan, you wear neither cloak nor hat."

"It does not matter. My heart is warm," she replied. "Why did you leave me, Monsieur?"

"I was scorned, Mademoiselle, and you drove me from your sight."

"How little you understand women," she answered.

"They are sometimes beyond comprehension," I said. "Have you come to wound me afresh?"

"No," she murmured. "When my strength returned and I found you had left the salon, I thought you had flown from the château, and from me."

"I should have done so, Mademoiselle, were I not a prisoner."

"I haunted the terrace time after time, and I think I should have killed myself, M. le Vicomte, had I failed to find you."

"Why?" I asked, with my heart at a standstill.

"Because you have been my friend, as well as my enemy; and a faithful friend, Monsieur, is the rarest gift in the world."

"You call me friend!" I exclaimed. "You, Mademoiselle?"

"Hush!" she said. "Why not, M. le Vicomte?"

"And trust me?" I asked.

"Have I not already proved my faith?"

"But I deceived you."

"Yes," she said.

"And lied to you."

"Many times," she replied.

"And played the rascal to the very hilt of iniquity."

"For the sake of the Duchesse!" said Mademoiselle, "and I wish you joy of her, Monsieur!"

I was dumb. How full of the devil's own shrewdness are women! Aurélie had seen through me at last, and my heart was laid bare. "For the sake of the Duchesse!" Ma foi! she was right, and from beginning to end Madame de Berri was answerable for the whole counterplot which had brought me to act the scoundrel's part with such conspicuous ability and extraordinary results. She had pushed me into the fire, and now would laugh to watch me burn, while Mademoiselle de Cheverny helped to pay the piper. Aurélie's hands still lay in mine, and the snow was growing so thick that I would have given worlds to make her take shelter on my breast. We were both clad in white from head to foot; but through the flakes I could see her eyes gleaming like diamonds, and a prettier sight was never seen out of Heaven.

"Mademoiselle," I said, "you told me you could never forgive and forget what I had done—what I had been. You could not even pity me. Yet you have come and put your hands in mine. Is it because I am pardoned at last?"

But Aurélie would make no answer, and I knew that she was trembling from head to foot.

"My time is short," I urged, "and we shall never meet again."

Mademoiselle's fingers tightened on my hands.

"You will not leave me?" she whispered. "Mon-sieur, stay!" and I knew at last that although she

might not ever forget my past, she must, in God's own day, forgive. She had flown to me from the salon of her own free will. She had prayed me to remain at her side ; but Fate, inexorable as Death, called me back again from hope, and life, and the promise of love to the dungeons of the Château Sainte Roxane. In a few moments the clock of the old tower would strike, and afterwards would fall the shadow. So I steeled myself for the end.

“ 'Tis a night of farewell, Mademoiselle,” I said, and, loosening my hands, I knelt all at once to kiss her feet. They were sunk deep in the snow, but I thought it no humility to search for them with my cold lips. I could hear Aurélie's sharp breathing, and that and the quick shivering of the loaded trees were the only sounds which cut the strained, tense stillness of the night. Then I rose again, and Mademoiselle, gazing at me with the snow beating down upon her face, tossed back her little head with the most inimitable charm, to drink from my eyes a love that was infinite. Her frock was soaked through and through, and the snow upon her neck was melting into a million crystals, which ran over her warm bosom like live gems. Her hair was as though 'twere sprinkled with diamonds, and had I dared I would have scattered them with my lips and crushed her lithe sparkling body in my arms ; but between us lay the sword of Death, and I bent to kiss her hands for the last time, and to murmur a

soft farewell. Ah, the bitterness of that parting ! I do not think Mademoiselle could have listened to M. le Duc's threats when he doomed me to the Frog dungeon of the Château Sainte Roxane. She could not have heeded the dread significance of my incarceration, for when I turned to leave her she again besought me with tears to stay.

"Nay, Mademoiselle, I must go," I answered.

"Whither, M. le Vicomte?" she said, in a voice that was almost inaudible.

"To the Château Sainte Roxane," I replied, and I heard her sob twice or thrice with an intensity which maddened me.

"You are going to give your life for my sake, and for the sake of the Cardinal's letters," she panted. "You have saved Madame la Duchesse du Maine and the rest of us poor foolish intriguing women, by letting me burn those papers of conspiracy. Even the Regent of France cannot throw us into the Bastille without some proof of our guilt; but you, Monsieur, are paying for all—you are on your way towards Death, and I have sent you there. Mother of Christ, have mercy, have mercy ! M. le Vicomte, you shall not go the Château Sainte Roxane, I will give myself into the hands of M. le Duc d'Orléans ; I will suffer as I deserve, and you shall help me to be strong. Come, come, come !"

She caught at my fingers and tried to drag me

towards the salon, shaking the snow in showers from her shoulders in the violence of her passion ; but I stood like a rock until, with a cry, she dropped at my feet and flung her arms around my knees.

“ You shall not die for me ! ” she gasped. “ You shall not die ! Oh, mon Dieu, will nothing make you speak ? ”

“ Mademoiselle de Cheverny,” I said, “ if I turned from the dungeons of the Château Sainte Roxane—if I faltered in giving my worthless life to save those whom I so nearly betrayed—if I stamped my foot upon the last shred of honour that clings to the name of de Championnet, I should deserve to be spat upon by God and all His angels ! Let me go, and may Heaven smile on you, Mademoiselle.”

My words ended in a whisper, and as I stooped to loosen Aurélie’s arms the clock commenced to strike my hour of doom. Bending my head, I breathed a kiss upon her hair, freed my knees from her embrace, and staggered towards the terrace like a man grown old and grey. Ere I entered the salon, I looked back, and saw in the midst of the whirling snow that swept down upon the parterre, a little white figure kneeling alone.

CHAPTER XX

THE DUCHESS WINS

SEVEN hours later, when I thrust open my chamber window, the snow had ceased, and there was a bright starry sky, extraordinarily brilliant and clear, with a dazzling glare of moonlight on the terrace and the parterre. The little berceaux were glittering like the frosted domes of minarets, and away beyond the grounds of the château slept the white valley and the pretty village of Cheverny, with the tall spire of the church standing like God's sentinel in its midst.

My eyes had not closed since I parted from Mademoiselle Aurélie, and I only awaited the dawn that I might wend my way to Sainte Roxane with an escort of guards. I knew M. le Duc had sent a groom to Paris immediately on my surrender; and when Dubois, a few minutes after I retired to my room, came to wish me a mocking good-night, he took care that I should not escape by locking the strong door from without.

I heard the wretch trip down the stair, jangling the keys and humming a scandalous chansonnette.

How little he trusted me ! He had even gone off with my sword, thinking that although I was no better than a rogue, and no worse than a rascal, I might make a swift resolve and cut the string of my own life. Yes, M. l'Abbé was determined that the Château Sainte Roxane should not be cheated of its prey.

I had been tramping my chamber with a flaming heart hour after hour, full of mad thoughts of Aurélie, and the cool gush of icy wind which poured through the open lattice did but wake in my brain a fresh fever of remorse. Once more I cursed the day I first saw Madame de Berri—once more I cursed my rash vow in the card-chamber of the Luxembourg ; but of what use were regrets ? I had brought down the storm of misery upon Mademoiselle's head, and all the self-sacrifice in the world could never atone for my sin.

I thrust my grey face out of the window and gazed down at the terrace. Just underneath me M. le Comte d'Anquital and Silvain de Cheverny had killed one another, and I smiled bitterly to think how well my magnificent diplomacy would have worked out but for my irresistible love of Mademoiselle Aurélie. M. le Duc would have held the secrets, Alberoni been duped and laughed at by all Europe, the dangerous plot against the Regency come to an inglorious end, and the conspirators would lie at the mercy of Monseigneur and the

Abbé Dubois, while I might have wedded Madame la Duchesse de Berri, and risen in time to rule France. A little more bloodshed—a little more unscrupulous diplomacy, and then . . .

But the night was cold, and I was closing the lattice with a clash when a woman's shadow was thrown strong upon the terrace, and, looking down, I saw Mademoiselle de Cheverny steal out from the château. "Heavens!" I murmured. "Do I dream?"

The door opened once more, and a second shadow darkened the snow. I could scarcely believe my eyes—it was Madame la Duchesse de Berri, holding something that glittered in her hand. She flung off her furs—Mademoiselle let the cloak drop softly from her shoulders, and in an instant I knew that a duel was the outcome of their challenge in the salon, for each held a rapier.

The moonlight was pale but fierce as it struck upon the château, the parterre, and the long, glistening terrace, and Madame's bosom and arms gleamed white as the snow. Aurélie too, had bared her shoulders, and nothing but a drooping coil of lace floated from her neck to shield her breast from the sharp and biting wind. Ah, these were women worth the name!

But Mort Christ! how my heart drummed when Aurélie fell on guard, and Madame sent her blade straight at her bosom. Parried! Yes, if the old

Chevalier had been her maître d'armes, he had taught her how to fence ; and even so long ago as the days when I walked with the Duchesse in the gardens of Versailles I had heard of Madame's proficiency.

They were a pair well matched, and it thrilled me when first one, and then the other, lunged and lunged until the sparks showered extremely prettily from their tinkling blades.

Once I heard Madame de Berri give a little wild, stifled cry, and prayed that Mademoiselle had drawn first blood ; but when, a moment later, the Duchesse leapt in with the litheness of a panther and nearly pierced Aurélie's side, my suspense grew maddening, and could I have squeezed my body through the narrow window, I must have dropped down and parted them.

" Is Mademoiselle satisfied ? " panted Madame de Berri.

" I will fight you till my last breath ! " gasped Aurélie, and with inimitable swiftness Madame flew at her again, but Mademoiselle de Cheverny made a beautiful rally, feinted once or twice, and then slipped her blade 'neath Madame de Berri's. There was a flash of fire—a gay, rasping sound that set one's teeth on edge, and I saw the sword of the Duchesse spin high in the air like a bright wheel of light, and tinkle down at her feet.

Madame was disarmed !

Aurélié stood with the point of her rapier resting on the snow, and a strip of torn lace from her bosom fluttering away on the icy breath of night. It was a scene of exquisite romance. The stars strewed the violet heavens like ten million diamonds, the great moon blazing in their midst, while forest, hill, and vale shone 'neath her glare with a soft brilliance indescribable. The wind sung low among the trees, and now and then a shower of snow would spurt from the creaking boughs and scatter like bright gems upon the terrace, where here and there Madame's and Aurélié's shifting, springing little feet had drawn dark ribbons as they fought.

Had Mademoiselle glanced up she might have seen my face at the window; but she was too intent on the Duchesse to heed aught save the fact that the daughter of the Regent of France had stooped to pick up her sword, and in the flash of an eye they had re-engaged. Three times Aurélié spared Madame when she might have run her through, and then to my intense horror I saw her deliberately open her guard and allow the Duchesse to lunge with devilish swiftness at her heart.

My eyes seemed full of fire—I caught the gleam of their arms and bosoms—the flash of Madame's rapier, and next instant Mademoiselle de Cheverny lay on her back upon the terrace with a quick stream of blood from her side darkening the snow.

A cry sprang from my lips that was drowned by

the scream of the Duchesse, and I saw her throw down her blade and race into the salon. I shook the strong centre-bar of my window till it rattled, but in spite of my mad fury it held fast, and seemingly 'twas hours before Madame de Berri reappeared with Madame Rochette, en déshabillé, and a couple of half-dressed lacqueys. I watched them carry Aurélie into the château; I heard the slam of the lattice, and the loud tones of Monseigneur the Regent as he shouted inquiries from the head of the stair—the babble of maids, and the thin, incisive voice of the Abbé Dubois, and afterwards the steady tread of men's feet.

They were bearing Mademoiselle to her chamber, and when the day dawned and M. l'Abbé broke in upon my agony to tell me that my guards had arrived, I was also informed that Aurélie lay in the Shadow of Death.

My strength fled my limbs, and I think even Dubois was awed by my change of face, for without a word he took my sleeve and led me slowly down the stair. Not a sign of Madame la Duchesse or the Regent.

In the courtyard, drinking hot wine and surrounded by ten or a dozen troopers, sat Captain d'Eglantine, whom I slightly knew, and saluting me respectfully, the guards brought forward one of Mademoiselle de Cheverny's horses. I pulled myself together lest these fellows and d'Eglantine should go

back to Paris and say that Audran de Championnet had turned coward in the hour of adversity, mounted to the saddle, and, taking a long look at the old château, clattered out of the yard in the midst of the troopers, and passed swiftly down the white, powdery road.

The hours fled, and ere grey dusk began to fall, leaving the Heavens all bloody with the wintry even-glow, we saw the tall battlements and gables of the Château Sainte Roxane rising black and grim against the sky.

CHAPTER XXI

SAINTÉ ROXANE

"I AM sorry for you, M. le Vicomte, but Monseigneur must be obeyed. Au revoir till the morn!"

With the Châtelain's words and the clang of the great iron door ringing in my ears I groped my way along the wet walls to my resting-place in the Frog dungeon, noting with surprise that the floor was free of water. The horrors of this prison had been whispered to me long ago by a friend of M. le Comte le Lally, who came out from it a madman; by the sister of Anselme d'Hautfort, who was found dead with a hundred rats tearing at his face; by an old comrade-in-arms of the Marquis de Pontolet, of the Gardes Françaises, who was released only to leap from the crenelated walls of the château into the Seine.

Yes, this dungeon had as black a history as any in France, and, although scarce a Parisian dreamed that it was still in use, M. l'Abbé Dubois was careful to send the most dangerous or the most hated of his enemies, not to the Bastille, but to a secret death amid the agonising terrors of this devil's

paradise. Its Châtelain was M. de la Valette, a rascal whose life Dubois had saved to make him the watch-dog of the Château ; and I do not think M. l'Abbé could have chosen a better man. M. de la Valette possessed a silky voice and a heart of stone; he was a thief, a murderer, an assassin, and a hypocrite ; he would smile at a friend and stab him in the back ; he would lick the feet of his worst foe to win a favour, and the shrewd Dubois found in him a minion who would mete out to the prisoners of the Frog dungeon as many miseries as his master would pay him for.

Captain d'Eglantine and his troopers were gone back to Paris, and save for the Châtelain and a few of his servants, a couple of gaolers and a brace of bloodhounds, the château was empty. And down in the Frog dungeon reigned a vast, illimitable stillness.

There was one single slit through which a ray of sunlight, no bigger than a hand, might steal at times into the black gloom 'mid which I was to live ; but at night, with foul things creeping o'er one, a man went step by step in horror, and presently would shine green eyes, growing in number as the moments passed, and the rats would come to rustle to and fro. Frogs, too, leapt from their haunts to croak around me as I sat upon the block of wood which served for bed and seat, and the cold was so intense that long icicles here and there hung from the dripping, vaulted roof.

My brain was torn betwixt wild thoughts of Mademoiselle de Cheverny and the ghastly hatred of my prison. I heard the rats race in scores across the dungeon, screeching as they ran. Time after time my hands flew to my face or neck to snatch away and crush some loathsome thing, and more than once I had a mind to dash my brains out 'gainst the wall.

Colder and colder grew the night : M. de la Vallette had not even offered me a cloak, and at last I was forced to tramp up and down lest I might sink through numbness into sleep. Out in the pure snow I could have died with a will, but here, with the rats feasting on my body—bah ! the very thought transfixed me with a terror that I had never known before, and I began to sing, to dance, and to shout like a madman in the vain hope of scaring them from my sight. But no, their green eyes would reappear until I could count them by hundreds, and when I drove them away they would come back again, bringing others in their train to rush and squeal and scamper round my feet.

Towards morn the wind began to rise, and when a gush of freezing water came sousing through the window-slit I knew that my dungeon was compassed about by the Seine, and I wondered what would happen if the river rose. Already it seemed as though the cell was deep below its face, for again and again the spray swept down upon me, and my

feet, when I set them to the ground, were wetted to the ankles.

It must have been three hours after dawn before a man came to me with some bread and wine, and gazing over his shoulder was M. de la Valette, a soft smile on his lips. He had a lanthorn in his hand, and flashed it full upon me.

"Bon jour, M. le Vicomte!" he cried.

I answered him not. I was as mad and savage as a wolf.

"Bon jour, Monsieur!" he cried again. "How have you liked your night in the Frog dungeon? Ah! you are not the first gay gentleman who has died here. Others greater than you, Vicomte, have passed down these steps before my eyes, and over each I have murmured the same requiem: 'Sic transit gloria mundi!' Never mind, my friend; what you have lost on earth you may gain in Paradise! Drink, and be merry! Renard, give M. de Championnet the Beaune."

The man offered me some wine. I would not touch it, so he set the pitcher at my side and went away, his feet squelching in the water that washed about the cell. I watched him go up the stair, leaving M. de la Valette to continue his pleasant-ries.

"M. l'Abbé Dubois has got his knife into you, Monsieur!" he said.

"Well?" I snarled.

"He is likely to keep it there," the Châtelain rejoined.

"Let him," I answered, throwing myself back on the seat. "What will occur, Monsieur, if the river rises?"

"You will drown like a rat," he laughed.

"Houra!" I said. "May it rise soon." And I saw a flash of admiration spring to his eyes.

"Sang bleu! you have a spirit, M. le Vicomte," he returned. "I wish your quarters were better; but Monseigneur particularly mentioned the Frog dungeon in his lettre de cachet, and one must obey the Regent of France—eh, mon ami?"

"Undoubtedly," I said.

"But Dubois is the Devil!" rattled on De la Valette. "It is he who has caused you to be thrown here."

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "How do you know that, Monsieur?"

The Châtelain smiled, slammed the heavy door, and left me alone to my wine and my bread. I drank a little of the Beaune, flung myself back on the seat, and for the first time since entering the dungeon, I slept.

Night had come when I awoke with a start to feel something running over my breast, and the instant my hand touched its wet, slimy body, a huge river-rat fastened to my cheek. I tore it away with a shudder and a blasphemy, and, leaping up,

recommenced my vigil, splashing to and fro amid the foul slime that had risen from the dungeon floor to mingle with the wash of the Seine.

Mon Dieu, the horror of it all!—the maddening loathsomeness! And yet, far down in my heart, I gloried to think that my suffering was for Aurélie, and this steeled me to go through the tortures of hell. By day I slept a little, and when the hosts of vermin crept from the recesses of the prison to make the hours hideous with their clamour and their hateful sport—when the ice-crystalled spray came scattering through the window to drench me to the skin—I tramped about in my misery, sometimes with loud songs, sometimes with mad laughter, and all the while tortured by visions of Mademoiselle Aurélie stretched on her back, as she had fallen beneath Madame's swift thrust on the terrace of the château.

A month passed, and still I lived ; and at last there came a day when M. de la Valette entered the dungeon to say that Madame la Duchesse de Berri had arrived at Sainte Roxane, and would see me. The lanthorn which he held dazzled my eyes, and I gazed at him, blinking.

" Tell Madame to go back to Paris ; I have done with her."

" Oh, come, M. le Vicomte, you are putting a fresh cord round your neck ; and I daresay the Duchesse has a tendresse for you. It is a mistake for

any man to resist a woman's love. Have you not already learnt that?"

"Where is she?" I asked, with a fierceness which startled him.

"In one of my rooms," he replied.

"Alone?"

"Except for a couple of lacqueys."

"Take me to her," I said, and M. de la Valette immediately led the way up the slimy stair. I crawled after him as fast as I could, but the Frog dungeon seemed to have made an old and weary man of me. I was numbed and chattering from the intense cold, for a black and heavy frost had turned every drop of water that ran about the cell to ice, and the occasional flashes of spray which sprang through the slit upon my shoulders were frozen at once to my clothes. As I passed along one of the corridors of the château in the rear of the Châtelain I glanced in a mirror, and then I saw how great a wreck I had become. My coat was glittering with the frosted spindrift from the Seine—my face was grey and lean, and the savagery of my eyes was enough to frighten the devil, and had not M. de la Valette allowed Renard to shave me only a day before, I should certainly never have recognised myself.

The Châtelain led me right into the presence of the Duchesse.

"I have brought M. le Vicomte to you, Madame,"

he said, with a gay, swinging bow, "and he is the only prisoner who has ever survived a month's incarceration in the Frog dungeon of Sainte Roxane. Shall I leave him alone to your pity?"

The Duchesse de Berri made a swift motion of assent, and M. de la Valette withdrew from the chamber and softly closed the door.

Madame was standing by the window, dressed in a magnificent cloak of scarlet, and I distinctly saw her shudder as she gazed at me. Her pretty mouth was hidden by furs, but the wanton flash of her lustrous eyes still possessed a charm which might lure a hundred fresh lovers to her feet. But she would never lure Audran de Championnet there again. Nay, by Saint Denis, Madame la Duchesse had lost her hold on me for ever.

"Is this you?" she began, in a voice of extreme gentleness.

"It is I, Madame," I said.

"I have come to offer you your life."

"I would rather you could offer me death," I replied, "I should welcome it with joy; but as for life, Duchesse, I would not take it at your hands—no, not if you prayed me on your knees."

"Are you mad?" she asked.

My only answer was a bitter laugh.

"Another week and you will be dead!" Madame said. "Think of it, M. le Vicomte—another seven days in the Frog dungeon! Dieu! I have heard of

the horrors of that place! Another seven days amid the filth and the vermin, and the wash of the Seine, and then a lingering death, perhaps at night, with the rats waiting hungrily round you! And I—I could give you freedom and love!”

“Duchesse, you are lying again!” I cried. “You are come here to torment me, and, by the God above, if you madden me afresh I’ll take your white throat in my hands, and send you where you can neither tempt, nor lie, nor play the courtesan. The Château Sainte Roxane has nearly done for me, Madame, but I have strength enough to kill you—yes, I have strength enough for that!”

She sank back against the heavy brocaded curtains, and her face went white. Sang Dieu! I had frightened her into a frenzy of fear, and the next moment she was grovelling on her knees.

“Oh, no, no! I am not lying, Audran. Do not look at me like that! I am afraid of you! Where is M. de la Valette? Where is he?”

She gazed wildly round, and I thought she was going to shriek for the Châtelain, but presently, still on her knees, she crept forward, and was about to take my hand in hers when I snatched it away with a curse.

“What has become of Mademoiselle de Cheverny?” I cried. “Is she alive or dead? I saw your duel upon the terrace; I saw her spare you thrice because you were unfit to die, and then, Madame, I

saw her let you run her through the body! Why was she so tired of life? What new misery had you been bringing upon her?"

"It was a fair challenge between us," gasped the Duchesse, "and in the salon Mademoiselle swore to let my blood run!"

"Then why did she change her mind and court death?" I said. "Madame, you must have had some further conversation with her, prior to the duel. Confess all, or . . ."

I made a pretence of darting at her throat—a brutal threat that forced her into a terrified acquiescence to my will.

"Before we fought, Mademoiselle asked what would be your fate," she panted, "and I told her of the Frog dungeon. I told her that you would soon die; I pictured the horrors of the night, and then she murmured that you were suffering for her sake."

"And so she, too, chose death," I said, and my voice was as hard as a flint. "You drove her to that, Madame? Well, is Mademoiselle alive or in her grave? Quick! I have scarce patience to keep my hands from you!"

"She lives!" breathed the Duchesse, and my heart gave a great leap. Mademoiselle lived! Great Heaven! what a flood of love rushed o'er my soul! what passion fired my brain! I was entombed in the Château Saint Roxane, while she was free to go

forth into the bright world—to taste fresh joys, and set her red lips on the blossom of a life of pleasure—to leave old memories far behind amid the misty past—to forget all—to forget me!

Mother of Christ! I was shaken to the heart by the very dream of such a tragedy, and scarce had strength to save myself from pitching on my face along the floor. Madame la Duchesse slid back from me, and stealthily arose.

“Where is Mademoiselle?” I cried, with a rattle in my throat. “Is she still at the Château de Cheverny?”

“Until she is strong enough to journey to Paris,” said the Duchesse.

“To Paris?” I exclaimed, my eyes wondering at her.

“Yes,” returned Madame, gliding a little farther away from me. “I may as well tell you the truth now, M. le Vicomte. Mademoiselle de Cheverny is determined to go to the Palais-Royal to beg your release of my father the Regent!”

I was too stunned to open my lips.

“If nothing else will save you—if words and tears fail, she is prepared to offer Monseigneur a bribe,” continued the Duchesse, biting at her furs. “And what do you think it will be, Monsieur?”

“I sank into a fauteuil and gazed up at her with a face of agony.

“Tell me!” I gasped. “Mon Dieu, speak!”

"How can I say the truth?" she softly cooed, and there was the very devil of malice in her splendid eyes.

"Mon Dieu, speak!" I cried again, and then Madame laughed across the room at me.

"Mademoiselle is going to buy you of Monseigneur the Regent," she said, triumphantly.

"And the price?" I whispered, sweat pouring from my face.

"Mademoiselle herself!" cried the Duchesse.

CHAPTER XXII

FOR THE SAKE OF MADEMOISELLE

"GOD forbid!" I exclaimed, struggling to my feet. "God forbid, Madame! I would rather bear the tortures of the damned than let Mademoiselle de Cheverny sell her body for my sake. But I will not believe Monseigneur could be so base as to take her in exchange for my life—the life of a man who does but suffer his deserts. I will not believe that even he could be so low a libertine!"

"Then there still might remain another to be won!" murmured the Duchesse.

"Who?" I cried; and she softly answered:

"Dubois."

"Dubois!" I breathed, and down sank my heart again. Ah, there lay my real enemy and Mademoiselle's danger! If in despair she went from the Regent to M. l'Abbé, she was lost; and Madame de Berri smiled to watch my white face and wild, bloody eyes. I could have bowed my head and wept like a child; but if ever Heaven called on me to play the man it was at this hour, when the bitterest cup that Fate can send a lover was lifted to my lips. To know that Mademoiselle might reach the hands of Dubois—

to realise she might voluntarily yield herself to him to save me from a death which I would die a thousand times over rather than she should suffer shame and martyrdom—Mother of Christ, what agony!

Yes, Madame la Duchesse was having her revenge, and tasting the sweets of a vengeance worthy even of her; and it was my turn now to kneel at her feet—my turn to snatch at her hand and implore her pity, her aid, her mercy—I, who had called her courtesan, and had nearly let my fingers snap upon her slender throat!

She looked down at me, mocking, with a smile that was indescribable in its malevolence.

“Hear me, Madame, for the sake of Heaven!” I cried. “Go to Mademoiselle de Cheverny and say such a sacrifice would be useless; say I am dead, and that the rats have claimed me; lie to her, and I will call down the blessings of the saints upon your head. Have mercy, Duchesse, on the woman that I love!”

Madame’s eyes flamed.

“So, at length you are come to my knees, a lover confessed,” she said, and her beauty at the moment was utterly transcendent.

“Yes, Duchesse,” I replied, “I love her, and I pray Heaven she loves me!”

“And you can ask my mercy? Mille diables! no man in the world save the Vicomte de Championnet would dare threaten, scorn, and then beg a favour of Madame la Duchesse de Berri!”

"You never cared one beat of your heart for me, Madame."

"What man yet gauged a woman's thoughts? I may have cared for you: I may have loathed you; and now, Monsieur, all I desire is to make you pay my own price. Could you blame me if I wished to set my heel upon your lips?"

"You have already set it on my heart!"

"And I will keep it there! Yes, Monsieur, you may yet be free of the dungeon of the Château Sainte Roxane, but you shall never break free of me! M. le Vicomte, I have still a fancy to become your wife; and if you ever leave this place it will not be as the lover of Mademoiselle de Cheverny, but as the husband of Madame de Berri!"

"Never!" I cried, and tottered like a man full of wine.

Madame laughed a low, soft laugh.

"Wait, Monsieur, and listen. In three days Mademoiselle will be sufficiently recovered to go to Paris, and if once she reaches the Palais-Royal she can only gain your pardon by becoming what you deem me to have long ago become—a courtesan. You see, I do not forget rash words; I have a good memory, and you shall smart for every insult. She will be either the mistress of Monseigneur the Regent or Dubois, perhaps mistress of both and others as well, for men tire of women, and constancy does not exist at the Palais-Royal."

"But she shall not go to Paris! God will not let her!" I exclaimed.

"It is strange how men in extremis of mind or body patronise le Grand Dieu," reflected the Duchesse. "You are growing weak, Vicomte, and there are tears leaping down your cheeks. You are no longer the old gay, debonair, swaggering Audran de Championnet of a few weeks ago, and yet, so strange a thing is woman's love, I am prepared to wed you,—I, the daughter of the Regent of France."

She tossed back her head with superb pride, and the light in her eyes was a challenge.

"Madame," I said, "I would not receive you as my wife to gain my release from twenty Saintes Roxanes! I would not marry you to save my life a score of times!"

The Duchesse beat her little hands together in a dumb fury.

"And who are you to speak of love?" I continued, gazing steadily at her. "Once, Madame, I was prepared to sell my body and soul for you; but you have proved yourself unworthy—you have lied—you have played the coquette—you have even done worse, and God only knows how many lovers you have drawn into the net of your amours. There is one woman alone that I worship, and she is Mademoiselle de Cheverny."

A light, wanton laugh fell from her lips.

"Mademoiselle can never be yours, Monsieur. She will belong to Monseigneur, or to M. l'Abbé—

while you, saved by her dishonour, will live to dream of her amid the magnificent intoxication of Versailles or the Palais-Royal. You will live to suffer, M. le Vicomte, and to hear Mademoiselle's name tossed to and fro by the lips of the vilest roués in France . . ."

"Stop, Madame, in the name of Heaven!" I cried. "Anything but that!"

The Duchesse smiled, and came nearer to me.

"If you consent to wed me within three days, I swear on the Cross to procure your pardon from Monseigneur."

"And Mademoiselle?" I murmured.

"Will be under no necessity of begging your liberty at his hands. She will remain at Cheverny—unharméd, pure."

"But what power have you, Madame, to drag my pardon from the Regent?"

"There is no man in the world I cannot win to do my bidding," she replied.

"Here in the château is a chapel," I said. "Will you swear before God's altar that you have come to me with the truth—that Mademoiselle intends to sacrifice herself for me, and that I can only save her by an alliance with you?"

Madame la Duchesse did not hesitate.

"Yes, Monsieur," she whispered. "I will swear."

"But why do you desire my hand?" I cried. "Once, Madame, I could have given you loyalty—I could have given you love; but now, even though

I wedded you a hundred times, my heart could never beat for you. It is no longer mine, but Mademoiselle de Cheverny's."

Her voice sharpened and cut me like a knife.

"I regret that she can never be yours, Monsieur. You ask me why I wish to be your wife, and I answer that I cannot tell you. Some women, Audran, are indescribable. They love and yet cannot be true. I have loved you—once—twice, many times; but there have been days when my heart ran riot, and then you were forgotten."

"And so, Madame, you cannot be faithful to me even through the sacrament of marriage."

"As faithful as some wives—that is all," she said. "Are you ready to prove my fidelity? At this moment, Vicomte, I have a passion for you."

"How long will it last, Duchesse? You may, for all I know, have had passions for scores of lovers, among them M. le Comte d'Anquital and M. le Marquis de Merivale. Scandal says you have always been prodigal in your loves."

If looks could kill I should have fallen dead at Madame's feet; and with her scarlet cloak trailing behind her, she swept towards the door—a curse ringing from her lips. Then, in a thrill of agony, the dread that her assurance of Mademoiselle's intention might not be a lie took hold of my soul and maddened me, and, reeling forward, I stretched out my hand and stayed her flight,

"Come with me to the chapel and swear your words are true!" I cried. "Where is M. de la Valette? Call him! I will hear your oath, and then, Madame, you can go to Mademoiselle de Cheverny, and tell her that it would be useless for her to strive to buy my life of the Regent, because I am about to purchase my freedom through an alliance with the Duchesse de Berri."

My voice sank, and she gazed at me in triumph.

"I said there was no man in France I could not win to do my will!" she cried, and went out into the corridor in search of the Châtelain; while I, sinking down again into my chair, launched forth peal after peal of mad laughter; and when, a moment later, Madame re-entered the room with M. de la Valette, I was stretched on the floor with the tears streaming down my face. But for those tears I think my heart had burst.

* * * * *

Resting on M. de la Valette's arm, I accompanied the Duchesse to the little bare chapel of the château; and when she had sworn her oath, Madame strove to induce the Châtelain to change my quarters, but he was adamant, and with as great a sangfroid as I could muster I parted from her and returned to my old prison.

Three days and nights wore through, and still I lived.

CHAPTER XXIII

LIFE AND LOVE

ON the morning of the fourth day, I was bidden by the Châtelain to come out of the dungeon once more ; and when at last I reached the chamber in which I had interviewed the Duchesse de Berri, there, to my unutterable astonishment, was none other than M. le Marquis de Merivale. I shall never forget the wave of compassion that swept over his face,—no, not if I live a hundred years ; and he assisted me to a fauteuil with a swift courtesy which caused the tears to flash into my weak blinking eyes.

“ Monsieur,” he said, “ permit me to present to you my congratulations. It is your wedding-day, and I am sent by Monseigneur the Regent of France with an order for your release from the Château Sainte Roxane. Madame la Duchesse is, I believe, on the road towards the Salesian convent, whither I now beg you will accompany me. My valet is here with some appropriate clothes, and while he is aiding your toilet I will make all arrangements with M. de la Valette for your immediate freedom.

Come, Vicomte, you are yet in the summer of your years, and there's still a charm in the world. In three hours you may be the blithest man in France. You have suffered, my friend, but when Madame is your wife your rejuvenescence will be complete."

I sat still, and continued to gaze at him with my winking eyes. The Frog dungeon had for the moment dimmed my sight, and I was but little better than a blind man when a shaft of sun came streaming through the windows and played around my feet. My brain, too, seemed thick, heavy, wild, and as for my heart, it had frozen to ice.

"What are you doing here, M. le Marquis?" I asked. "There was a time when you loved the Duchesse, and now you have come to see me wed her."

"And why not?" returned the Englishman. "A wedding, Monsieur, is of interest even to a rejected lover, and when M. le Duc d'Orléans desired me to bear your pardon to Sainte Roxane I could scarcely dare decline." And I distinctly heard the Marquis laugh as he suddenly slipped out of the room and left me to the mercies of his treasure of a valet.

In half-an-hour I was transformed. Michael dressed me in a coat of daffodil and silver, a rose vest, white breeches and hose, and at the instant he fastened a rapier to my side and offered me a cup of wine I began to feel a new man. My face,

cleansed of the slime and filth of the Frog dungeon, shone white as ivory ; my eyes were bright with an unnatural brilliance, but as the Moselle warmed and braced my body I felt that even though bound by indissoluble bonds to Madame de Berri, I might at least go forth and seek peace amid the romance and dangers of the life I had lived with such reckless gaiety in the old unregenerate days long past.

“ Yes, I would wed Madame, but naught in the world should chain me to her side ; and in this mind I followed M. le Marquis to the carriage, acknowledged the salute of M. de la Valette, and drove off to the Salesian Convent of Sainte Roxane. The morn was fragrant with the breath of spring, the almond-trees were in blossom and the scent of the violet was heavy on the air ; and though the distant hills were ringed about by ribs of sparkling snow, the song of birds deep in the valley warmed winter from the heart. M. le Marquis kept silence all the way, and until the horses stopped at the gates of the convent, and the Mother Superior came rustling out to welcome him, never a word passed between us.

“ M. le Vicomte has come,” he announced ; and, with a charming bow and smile, l’Abbesse Cécile led us through a silent corridor and so on into the small but magnificent chapel. The door closed, and almost at the instant of our arrival the organ pealed, and the liquid notes of the nuns’ voices commenced to rise and fall in exquisite cadence on the ear.

I knew not what they sang, for my heart was wild with inextinguishable longings for the love of Mademoiselle, and I was moving towards the altar with my eyes fixed upon the old silvery-haired priest, when the Marquis caught my arm and swung me into an adjoining oratory. It was very dim, but standing by a prie-dieu was a lithe, white-clad figure, and I wished to Heaven Madame had met me at the altar, once for all, and spared me the bitterness of another interview. The door fastened softly, and then the Duchesse approached, holding out her little hands in a gesture of supplication.

"Audran!" she whispered.

I had no welcome for her save a scowl.

"Audran!" she said again, and came nearer, until, with a nameless abhorrence, I felt her fingers plunge lightly into my silken sleeve. I stepped back.

"Mon Dieu, Madame, I have done with your caresses," I said, "and though in an hour you may claim my hand and be my wife, you can never, even in a lifetime, hope to win my heart. Mademoiselle de Cheverny is in possession of that!"

She uttered something between a low laugh and a cry in a voice inexpressibly moved, and lifted her face to mine. I looked down, and it was the face, not of Madame la Duchesse de Berri, but of Aurélie!

I did not speak, because there are times when love can find no words, but I snatched her to my

breast and held her there, panting, breathless, and as white as the snow which fell around her when we parted in the gardens of Cheverny. In the choir of the chapel the nuns were still singing, and with the music falling like the voice of Heaven on our ears I sought Mademoiselle's lips, and drank from them the sacrament of a love greater than life, and death, and the illimitable æons of eternity !

For a moment she lay still in my arms, and I only released her when a soft tapping on the door announced the reappearance of the Marquis de Merivale. His face was radiant with smiles.

"Come, Monsieur, are you ready?" he asked.

"Ready!" I exclaimed. "For what, M. le Marquis?"

"For your wedding," he replied.

"Has Madame arrived?" I said, in a hoarse whisper.

"No, but she is on the road. Quick, M. le Vicomte, there is no time to lose!"

"Mon Grand Dieu, I do not understand you!" I gasped. "You brought me here to wed Madame de Berri, and led me instead into the presence of Mademoiselle de Cheverny. And now, Monsieur—now you are come to drag me back from Heaven to Hell!"

I gazed wildly at him, but his only answer was a laugh; and although Aurélie's eyes were glittering with tears, her face wore a smile that made my heart leap.

"I am here to take the place of the Duchesse," she said. "If M. le Vicomte would save his life, he must be content to gain Monseigneur the Regent's pardon by making me Madame la Vicomtesse de Championnet."

A flush crimsoned her cheeks, and I flung my arms wide that she might fall again upon my breast, while the Marquis, with his accustomed delicacy, discreetly turned on his heel and studied the saints which shone in the midst of the little painted windows of the oratory.

"Who has worked this miracle?" I breathed. "Was it you, my life?" but Aurélie shook her head.

"It was M. le Marquis," she said, nestling an inch closer to my shoulder, and in the excess of my gratitude I loosened my arms from my love, and rushed forward to lift his hand to my lips. He drew it away as though I had stung him; and then I remembered that Englishmen do not suffer embraces from any but women.

"Monsieur," I murmured, "how can I repay you?"

"By making haste with your wedding, M. le Vicomte," he said. "Madame la Duchesse will presently arrive, and then there'll be the Devil! Do not waste words on me; but if you are inclined to present my fighting-cock with a pair of gold spurs in memory of his battle at the Palais-Royal, I have no doubt, Monsieur, he will be proud of your apprecia-

tion. It was Saint Peter, and not I, who won your pardon from M. le Duc d'Orléans. Hearing I was still in Paris, Monseigneur desired my presence at a select card-party, and in the midst of the fun introduced a magnificent cock, on which he was prepared to lay a wager of five thousand louis. I immediately sent Michael for Saint Peter; and, by Heaven, they fought until they scarcely had a feather left. Monseigneur was ready to lay seven, eight, ten thousand louis on his bird, so badly was mine being served; and amid all the excitement and blood, I cried out that I would stop the fight unless M. le Duc was willing to include in his wager the life of the Vicomte de Championnet. On my soul, I thought he would have called his lacqueys and had me kicked from the doors; but there chanced to be one or two men there, Monsieur, who had known you in better days, and, in spite of M. l'Abbé Dubois, Monseigneur was persuaded to throw your pardon, instead of the ten-thousand louis, down upon the card-table. Saint Peter won, and I left the Palais-Royal with the order for your release from the Château Sainte Roxane. That is how it all happened, M. le Vicomte!"

"But the Duchesse?" I exclaimed.

"Ah, yes, the Duchesse!" laughed the Marquis. "really, Vicomte, she is superb, and I do not think another such woman exists."

"Thank God for that!" I cried.

"Madame is incomprehensible," continued M. le

Marquis, "and I am beginning to believe she has loved M. de Championnet all the time. I had scarcely returned from M. le Duc's card-party, when a messenger arrived to beg my immediate attendance at the Palais-Royal, and back I went, to find Monseigneur in the devil of a rage. The Duchesse had just intimated to him her intention of wedding you, Monsieur. She had, it appears, been suffering from intense ennui, and the idea occurred to her that it would startle Paris if she contracted a secret alliance with the prisoner of Sainte Roxane, and drove in state through the streets to the Palace of the Luxembourg. So she demanded your release. The Regent refused, and swore volubly; Madame swore back at him; but in the end he signed your pardon a second time, and the Duchesse triumphantly retired to bed."

I held my breath. Ciel! Madame la Duchesse, then, had actually kept her word, and succeeded in winning my freedom that she might carry through her desires; and I awaited with impatience the conclusion of M. de Merivale's recital.

"M. le Duc d'Orléans was determined to play Madame an exquisite trick," ran on the Marquis. "He did not tell her he had already given an order for your release; but he begged me to hasten to Sainte Roxane and see that you at once quitted the château, so that when the Duchesse arrived she might find you flown.

“‘Monseigneur,’ I said, ‘I have a better plan. M. de Championnet loves Mademoiselle de Cheverny. Permit me to arrange that the sisters of the Salesian Convent shall not be cheated of a wedding in their chapel, and you will earn the devotion of Mademoiselle and the everlasting loyalty of M. le Vicomte!’

“‘What!’ he cried. ‘You would have Mademoiselle take the place of the Duchesse?’

“‘Exactly, Monseigneur,’ I replied; and in a transport of ecstasy the Regent could scarcely refrain from falling on my neck.

“‘Madame intends starting for Sainte Roxane at ten o’clock,’ he said. ‘Leave Paris three hours sooner, M. le Marquis. Go first to Cheverny, and escort Mademoiselle, if she be willing, to the Salesian Convent, and then drive to the château for De Championnet; and I would give Versailles to see the face of Madame la Duchesse when she arrives at the chapel!’”

“I obeyed Monseigneur’s commands; I went to Cheverny, and in some trepidation requested a word with Mademoiselle;” and the Marquis, glancing towards Aurélie, presented her with his most delicate bow.

“And you were willing?” I cried, taking her hands in mine.

“What could I say?” she whispered. “If I were not willing, Monsieur, I should not now be

here," and then she covered her face, but her bright eyes laughed at me 'twixt her little white fingers. I had a longing to snatch her again to me, but the Marquis de Merivale opened the door and was beckoning us; so with the music of the nuns' voices chiming on our ears, we went to the altar, and when the vows were said, Madame la Vicomtesse, leaning on my arm, passed with me out into the brilliant sunshine.

We had scarcely entered the coach—nay, my foot was only on the step, when the noise of horses tearing along the resonant road told us that Madame la Duchesse de Berri was come! I caught a glimpse of her as she stood in the carriage, and of her lacqueys in cream and gold; I saw her shake her fist at me, and heard her voice shrilly cheering on the smoking horses, and then leaping to Aurélie's side, I bade the coachman drive like the wind to Cheverny, and with a wave of the hand to M. de Merivale, who stood laughing at the side of l'Abbesse Cécile we sped away from the convent.

But alas, the unexpected invariably happens, and in dashing past the Duchesse our wheels caught in her equipage, and Aurélie and I were shot out into the road, to arise shaken, though unhurt, and, at the mercy of Madame de Berri!

Her face was white with passion, and I saw her parted lips quivering with the intensity of a rage she cared not to conceal, when M. le Marquis lounged

carelessly forward, and the first lash of her tongue fell on him.

"So this is your work, Monsieur?" she cried.

M. de Merivale bowed.

"A very pretty lover," she sneered. "I suppose you were tired of Mademoiselle de Cheverny, and welcomed the earliest chance of getting rid of her to M. le Vicomte de Championnet. You and the Vicomte, Monsieur, are a pair of demons!"

"And you, Madame, are receiving your deserts? Did M. de la Valette direct you to the convent?"

"No!" she cried. "Instinct guided me here, and when the Châtelain said you had left Sainte Roxane with M. le Vicomte, I knew some new devilry was afoot. But you shall both pay for your sport: Audran de Championnet escaped from the Frog dungeon through a forged pardon, and he shall return there to die a rat's death amid rats; while you, M. le Marquis, shall find a home in the Bastille. Here is M. le Duc's order for the Vicomte's release, but he will not need it now!" and Madame, snatching the second pardon from her bosom, wrenched it into a hundred pieces and called on her lacqueys to take me prisoner.

I whipped out my sword, and at the same moment the Marquis held to the gaze of the Duchesse the slip of paper he had won from Monseigneur through the agency of his fighting-cock Saint Peter, and Madame, recognising that she was indeed the

dupe, burst into a hurricane of oaths that made l'Abbesse Cécile cover her ears and beat a hasty retreat to the convent.

Then the Duchesse laughed, and the empty echo of that laugh will ring in my heart till I die ; but, with the gallantest sangfroid that ever was, she alighted from her carriage and laid her hand on M. de Merivale's arm.

"Drive the Vicomte de Championnet and Madame la Vicomtesse to Cheverny !" she cried, turning to her lacqueys. "Come, M. le Marquis, I am tired : lead me to the convent ;" and, with a last flash of her eyes at Aurélie, the Duchesse swept out of sight.

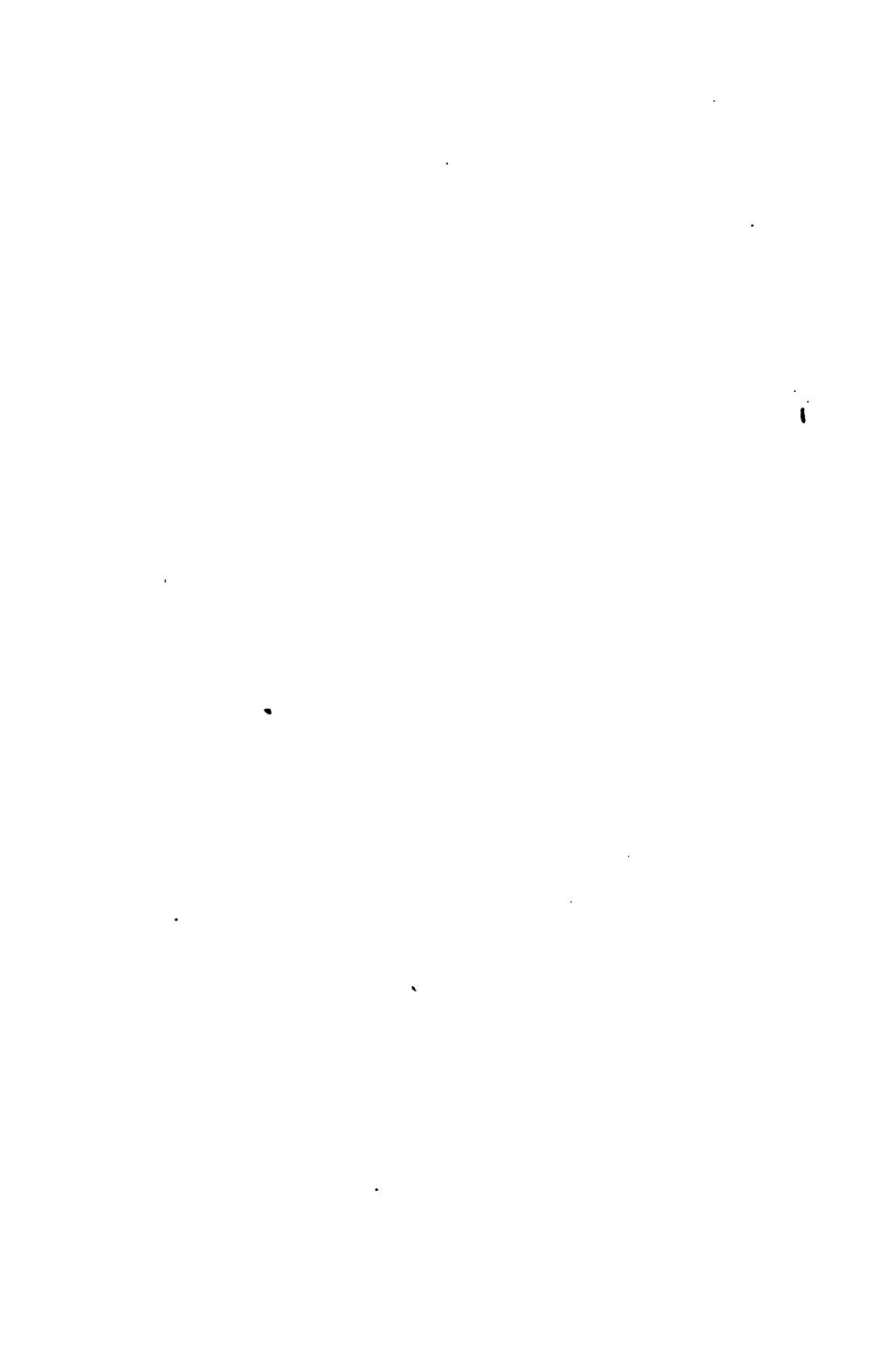
A week later we heard she had secretly married the Chevalier de Riom, and although there was the devil to pay at the Palais-Royal, there was peace at Cheverny.

THE END.

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1. The first part of the document is a list of names and dates.

2. The second part of the document is a list of names and dates.







